Prologue

The sun rose over the mountains of Ponil, New Mexico, as it had since time out of mind. Oblivious to the changes in power and the affairs of men, it shone down upon the small village and the Franciscan monastery that overlooked it. It rose to greet the monk who had emerged from the monastery's entrance to see the sunrise.

Brother Antonio Rodriguez greeted the sun as an old friend, musing upon the mixture of change and constancy that made up the perception of reality. Just a few decades ago, this land had been part of Spain. Then came the Mexican revolution, and it became just as much a nation as the United States to the east. Then came another war, and yet another, as the land became America, and America split in two only to reunite. Now

the land remained at peace, a territory, but not yet a state.

Still, the sun rose and fell, and beyond, God Almighty ordered the changing of the seasons and the movement of the spheres. In the end, all would go to God. Such as it should be.

Brother Antonio smiled slightly, and bowed his head for a morning prayer. Yes, the morning came and with it, another pleasant day communing with the Almighty, and tending the garden beneath the watchful gaze of the ruins of Koya.

He turned his head to the left. On the horizon was another mountain, and the monk could just make out the shades of stone houses hewn and built into the hard rock. Long, long ago, they had been of the Anasazi, those ancient native peoples who had built magnificent cities of stone. In time, they had come and gone, their

people having to migrate away due to famine, drought, and war.

However, that wasn't the end of the story there in Koya. The city was named for a legendary shamaness who had experienced most unusual visions in the city. Visions of a triple god, one and three at once. A god most of her people knew not. Koya had drawn strange symbols on the walls of her home, and told her people to wait. To wait until the time came when strangers would arrive in the land. Strangers who would explain all.

So, after Koya herself mysteriously vanished, and the city decayed, the native tribe in the area waited. Then one day, the Spanish missionaries came. They worshipped the triple god, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The natives found their answer.

Almost overnight, the tribe converted to Christianity, and the monastery built. Now, centuries later, Brother

Antonio, himself a descendant of the people of Koya, stood, still seeking to serve the one true god. Change and certainty. The temporal and eternal. Such was reality for mankind.

And soon his own reality would experience quite a change.

He squinted, noting that a shadow moved down the mountainside from the ruins. His brow furrowed, and he held up a hand over his eyes to shield the sun and get a better look.

It was a man; that much could be told. But what would a man be doing there? No one visited the ruins, save for the occasional pilgrim, and none were known to be there now. What could it mean?

The monk watched as the man stumbled down to the foothills. He stopped and fell down. A moment later, he

stood, and began to walk unsteadily in the town's direction.

Brother Antonio knew that something was very wrong. The desert between the mountain and the city was several miles, and hard to cross without a horse in the best of times. Certainly not with the sun rising and no water.

He turned, and quickly moved back into the monastery. A few minutes later, he rode out on a strong, freshly fed and watered horse, with a jug of water at his side. He had no idea who the mysterious stranger was, but knew that he would need help.

A few minutes later, he approached the man, still staggering in vain through the desert. Brother Antonio saw a strong, grizzled man of about his own age approaching. The man wore the tattered remains of a twenty year old Civil War Confederate uniform. A red

bandana, normally used to cover the lower part of the face, hung about his neck. Whatever hat the man had worn was now missing.

Antonio slowed down his horse to a trot, and approached closer. “Good day, sir,” he called out. “I saw you from a distance and thought you may need water.”

The man looked up, his muddy brown eyes drifting in and out of focus. His cracked lips tried to mouth words, but no sound came. Antonio stopped his horse, slid off, and approached the stranger with the jug outstretched.

The stranger, upon seeing the jug of water, seemed to regain some lucidity. Enough, at least, to reach for the offered water. The monk handed it over, and the stranger nodded his thanks. Clasping it in both hands, he drank deeply, the cool refreshing water dribbling

down his unshaven chin, and washing away some of the dust that clung to him.

“Sir, did you come from the ruins?” Antonio asked, even though he felt he already knew the answer. “Pray, what was your business there?”

“The…ruins…” the man rasped, more to himself than to Antonio. He lowered the jug, and turned slightly, looking back along the path he had come. The path to the ruins.

As he did so, the monk caught a glimpse of his lower right forearm, and gasped. An image had been crudely tattooed there. A rough outline of the state of Mississippi with the number twenty two in the middle. He, like everyone else in the area, knew that sign.

Once, it marked its wearers as members of the Confederate army’s twenty second infantry regiment.

However, in more recent years, it stood for something else. For with the end of the war, and the end of two Americas, some of the former members of the regiment had come west and became outlaws. And the leader was a man named…

“I know who you are,” Antonio whispered. The man turned back to the monk, who took an involuntary step backward.

“I’ve seen your face on wanted posters. You’re David Sykes!”

The man frowned, but more in confusion than anger. Hesitantly, he took a step forward, but his gaze swam in and out of focus. He tried to remember to speak, but felt his eyes grow heavy.

Antonio gripped his horse’s reins, ready to scramble up and bolt for the monastery. Yet, Sykes seemed too weak, too dazed, to do anything.

His knees gave out then, and Sykes tumbled to the ground. Darkness began to overtake him, and he lost all awareness of the monk, the water, the sun, or anything else in the present. Rather, his memory stretched back over twenty years, to an entirely different ending.

I

The war between states had just ended. North and South had reunited, at the cost of a devastated southern region, and nearly an entire generation of young men. Those who had survived, on both sides, had been mustered out, and were returning home. Among them, Mississippi native David Sykes.

A young, robust man of twenty, David rode his horse down the dusty path towards the horse farm that served as his home. Still dressed in his army uniform, the man cut quite a distinguished figure, even in defeat. His eyes looked from left to right, as if grimly preparing for any challenges that might come. Yet none did, and David was left with only his thoughts to do battle with.

Some had claimed that the war had been fought to free slaves. Others insisted that the real cause had been whether a state within the union could decide its own fate, and to what degree. Already, people debated both and neither, and David figured that the debate would go on long after this day. Not that he really cared. For him, the war had been one thing and one thing only. Escape from the farm.

For as long as he could remember, he had been here, with his father, Laban, and his elder brother, Esau.

His mother he had never met, for she had died in birthing him.

Laban Sykes had never remarried. Nor had he ever seemed to forgive young David for surviving. He had never allowed him to go to school, had shown him little affection and had beaten him over the smallest signs of disrespect or disobedience.

Laban was a hard man, a simple man, seemingly born of the very soil beneath his feet. Yet, he was also a practical man, and had at least taught his boys how to read and write. He had shown him how to grow crops and care for the horses, just so they could help, if nothing else.

Yet, for all their efforts, making a living hadn't come easily, and when the war broke out, David had asked his father if he could enlist in return for sending his salary back home. Amazingly, his father had said yes.

So he had gone off to war. On the killing fields of battle, he had developed a skill, and even a taste for taking life. There had been something empowering about it. Something freeing. Freedom had been new to him, and he found he liked it. Liked it enough to kill, should anyone threaten it.

So why was he returning home?

David supposed that there was, in spite of it all, some residual feeling of obligation where his father was concerned. After all, whatever else could be said of him, his father had brought him up and taught him basic skills.

He half remembered reading something about honoring one's father and mother as well. The Sykes family wasn't religious, and only rarely went to church. Still, there was an old family bible that had belonged to

his mother, which they had skimmed over when learning to read.

He supposed that his parents had considered the name Jacob for him, given his brother's name. But his mother had reportedly wanted something grander, something to inspire him, so David he had become.

A few people, old neighbors, looked up as David rode by a field. They waved, recognizing him, and he nodded back, although he didn't stop to speak. None of them were really what he'd call friends, and he had to hurry up and get home. It had been too long of a day.

Finally, he passed by a rickety old fence, and turned his horse off the path to trot alongside it. By and by, an open gate presented itself, and David rode into his own pastures.

He looked around. The grass was brown, and patchy, and he couldn't see any horses grazing. Further up the path, he saw his house, the barn, and a small sickly vegetable garden off to the side. Clearly it hadn't been a prosperous year for anyone in Mississippi.

He rode up to the barn door, jumped down from his saddle, and opened the door. Leading his mount in, he noted that only three or four other horses were left. He figured that the others were taken by the army for the cavalry division.

He sighed, and selected a stall that still had some hay and water within. Securing his horse, he stepped back outside to head to the house's front door.

How would they take his homecoming? He wondered. Did they even know the outcome of the war yet?

“Dad! Esau!” David called out, rapping on the door. “It’s me, David. “I’ve come home.”

No answer immediately came, and David frowned. He rattled the doorknob, but the door was locked. He pounded a little harder.

“Hello? Hey! Dad, it’s me! It’s…”

He heard the door rattle on the other side, and then open for him. David was greeted, not by his father, but by his brother.

Esau Sykes resembled his brother, but taller, leaner, and greyer despite only being a few years older. Although Laban had treated him better, Esau took everything worse than David. Moody and anxious, he worried constantly, and many days had worn himself out checking and double checking everything.

“David,” Esau whispered. Slowly, hesitantly, he put his arms around his brother. David awkwardly returned the embrace; neither was terribly affectionate. Then, he looked at Esau searchingly.

“Where’s dad?”

Esau looked down. “You were gone, and I didn’t know how to tell you. You never wrote back.”

“I don’t write letters; you know that,” David replied, a sense of what the news would be welling up in him. “Tell me what?”

“Dad’s gone,” Esau confirmed. “Died last winter of a fever.”

Laban Sykes dead, David thought. A lump rose in his throat, and a thousand emotions flowed through his mind. The man who had fathered him, the man who had taught, oppressed, cared for, beaten, protected, and

resented him was dead. David supposed he had loved, though never liked him. Either way, his father had been an anchor, a constant that now was no more. The last vestiges of certainty in his life had fled like so many Confederate hopes and dreams.

So, what now?

“He’s buried in the back of our property,” Esau told David, leading him around the house’s perimeter. They soon stood on the back, looking on the rear pastures. David squinted, and could see a small unmarked headstone near the fence line. All that was left of his father. All that was left of life before the war.

He supposed there was nothing left now to keep him in this place. He would have to figure things out tomorrow.

Slowly, they walked back to the front door. For now, a hot dinner and a good night's sleep were in order. Let the past fade away, unmourned, and the future come as it would.

II

A loud rapping at the Sykes front door roused David from his sleep. He had crashed in his old bed just a few feet from what served as their living room. Looking out the window, he saw the silvery light of dawn.

He grumbled under his breath, and staggered to the door, wondering who it could be at this early hour.

"Horseman? Hi, Horseman! You there?"

The voice beyond the door answered his question before he even opened it, and let Lucius Bale in.

He was about the same age as David, but slightly taller and wirier. He had been the sergeant of David's

unit until a few days ago, and David, while figuring the unit would stay in touch, was surprised that he had come so soon. And with another of their army brothers, no less.

The third man was ruggedly handsome, with blond hair, blue eyes, a square jaw, and neatly trimmed mustache. While his given name was William Weston, he had been known as Darwin to his fellows, due to his outspoken atheism.

Darwin had been the wealthiest in the company. The son of a plantation owner, he had attended college somewhere on the East Coast, where he had acquainted himself with the still new theory of evolution. He had subsequently renounced all belief in the supernatural, and had increasingly become convinced that all were animals and that might was the only true right.

David suspected part of the appeal for Darwin was that he could justify slavery to any abolitionist who argued with him on those grounds. If all were animals, and there was no higher good or evil, why try to argue that there was a God who loved all?

He probably should've been an officer, if not for his vices and his views. He was well known for loving wine and women; once more, he would deflect any attempts at moralizing with atheism. So he found himself among the enlisted and the drafted instead. Lucius was quite fond of him, and David admitted he wasn't without charisma.

"Horseman! Good to see you!" Lucius said, cordially shaking David's hand with vigor. "I was hoping we had the right place."

"You do," David answered, also shaking Darwin's hand. "But what are you doing here? I thought you and

Darwin were going to spend some time at his plantation."

"David? What's going on?" Esau asked, coming in, and rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

"This is my brother, Esau," David explained to his guests. "Esau, this is Lucius Bale and William Weston, two of my comrades from the army."

"Call me Darwin," the aristocrat said. "I gave everyone, myself included, a nickname during the war. As well as talked them all into getting tattoos of our company."

He pulled up his sleeve, revealing an outline of Mississippi with their regiment number, twenty two. David and Lucius did likewise. Esau grunted.

"So, you're Horseman to them, David? For obvious reasons, I guess."

He looked at Lucius. What do they call you?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Lucius replied, suddenly looking grave. “To answer you, Horseman, Darwin’s plantation is gone.”

“What? Just like that? How?”

“Yankees took it,” Darwin said. “Looted everything they could carry off. Freed the slaves. My family is fleeing to Atlanta, but…I don’t know. Just not feeling that way.”

“I’m sorry.”

Darwin shrugged, and looked philosophical. “It’s all part of the struggle for survival. We fought, we lost, and the Yanks were stronger. End of story.”

David led them to their small kitchen and found a flask of whiskey for them all to share. Darwin,

particularly, took a considerable draught before continuing.

“But we all still live. And there are other places to go. Places where we may well be strong enough.”

“How’s that?”

“Remember Diamond?”

“Yeah, sure. Arkansas boy.”

“He and a few others are in the same boat as we are, Horseman,” Lucius told David and Esau. “Getting home only to find there’s little or no home to go back to. But he’s heard that cattle ranchers are starting to hire hands in northern Texas. Good money, but a long journey and hard work.”

“What does this have to do with me?” David asked.

“Most of us can ride at least a little,” Lucius continued. “But we’re short a few horses. Plus we could use someone to help give some pointers on horseback riding.”

“Me.”

“What do you say?” Darwin asked. “Why not? What do we have to look forward to here? The Confederacy is over; slaves are free…who knows what else the North might do?”

“David, you just got here,” Esau protested. “And I could really use your help here on the farm. Since Dad died, it’s just been me, and the last couple of seasons haven’t done very well.”

“Just you two here?” Lucius asked.

David nodded.

“And you still have houses?”

“A few,” Esau said. “They’ve held up pretty well, despite the conditions.”

“Well then, why not cut your losses?” Darwin pressed. “Throw in with us. We can pool together what we have left, and get more out west.”

Esau looked uncertainly at his brother. “David?”

“I don’t know,” David told the other three. “It is tempting. I don’t really want to stay here, anyway. But I would like to rest awhile. Think about it.”

“Sounds fair,” Lucius nodded. “Tell you what. I’ll go get Diamond and Shaman. Then, if you don’t mind, we can stay here a few days and really plan out the trip. What do you say?”

David looked at Esau again. Even at that, things would be moving too fast for him. Still, he found that he

wasn’t really enjoying the thought of just sitting home forever. Sure, Esau would be happy with that. But him?

“All right, Lucius,” David heard himself say, speaking for both brothers.

III

A few days later, six men were staying at the old Sykes house. Darwin and Lucius had made a supply run or two, and then brought two more of their former company here. Diamond, named because he was from a wealthy family in Arkansas, had kept up a correspondence with his family during the war. That was how he had learned about the need for cattle drivers in Texas.

Shaman, on the other hand, had been the company’s medic. Because he had had a Choctaw grandfather, he also knew a lot about herbal remedies. A stone faced

man with stern black eyes, Shaman had nevertheless also attended one of the universities, and had often vied with Darwin for the smartest man of the company.

As David looked around the table, it somehow felt right to him to have the core group of the company back together, so soon after they had been mustered out. It gave him a sense of hope, having something to look forward to. Hope. That made all the difference between what could be born, and what couldn't.

They had spent the day taking inventory of their supplies. With the Sykes' horses, they had enough to ride on plus an extra one to serve as a pack animal.

Darwin had spread out a fairly recent map of the United States on the table for all of them to see. "We could get to the Mississippi river by sundown, if we leave in about an hour," Darwin said, tracing a route with his finger. "There should be a bridge about here. We find a

place to camp, and in a few days, we get to Diamond's place here, on the Arkansas border with the Indian Territory. Then, if we ride through there, keeping a low profile, we should get to Texas easily enough."

"Couldn't we wait a few more days?" Esau asked, causing more than one set of eyes to roll. Esau hadn't wanted to leave the farm, even given the declining quality of the soil. He had been increasingly vocal about it as time went on.

"Brother, haven't you heard anything said to you these last few days?" Lucius asked. Brother had been the nickname the group had selected for Esau, both because he was David's brother, and because it was more flattering than some of the proposed alternatives.

"There's nothing to stay for anymore. Nothing. Why do you want to stay here?"

“This is our home, David,” Esau protested. “And I’m just as much the heir as you. Now you and your boys come in here and start taking away everything? That’s not right!”

“Look Esau, we’ve been over this,” David said. “I can either leave you the house and one horse, taking the other two or you can come with us and share in everything we have. You’re strong and can ride. We could use you.”

“But…what about the house?”

“What about it?” Darwin frowned. He rolled up the map, and tucked it under his arm. “I lost a much nicer house than this one, and you don’t hear me whining.”

“But…”

“We leave in one hour,” Darwin interrupted. “You have till then to decide if you’re in or out. Come on boys; let’s get packing.”

An hour later, the horses were loaded, and David sat atop his horse, looking at the desolate house and land for the last time. Diamond, Darwin, and Shaman were nearby, finishing up the loading of the pack horse. David only hoped that his brother would change his mind at the last minute.

To his relief, Esau and Lucius emerged from the dwelling. Esau’s eyes were downcast, and he was muttering under his breath. But he had a pack in his hand to load his horse, and Lucius smugly followed him.

“Wise move, Brother,” Lucius assured him. “Go on and get your horse. I’ll just check and make sure nothing important is being left.”

Esau went to the barn. Lucius winked at David, and hurried back inside. David’s brow furrowed. What was his friend up to? Surely not…

Esau rode up to them, and Lucius came back out again. He scrambled up his own horse.

“Ready?” he asked. “Let’s get moving, then.”

“Right,” David said. “Once we leave town…”

“David!” Esau pointed behind him. They all followed his finger.

A cloud of black smoke wafted from the front window. Esau was about to scramble down from his horse, when Lucius clasped his hand on the other man’s shoulder in a firm, not entirely friendly way.

“Hey Brother. You wanted to know my nickname during the fighting?” Lucius asked. “It was Fireman.”

He laughed. “Yes sir, I had to do occasional scouting missions. When I could, I’d find something to set fire on. Drove the Yankees mad!”

Esau just gaped at the smoke, as the cloud got larger. The smile faded from Lucius’ face.

“No going back,” he told the shocked Esau. “Only going on. Understand?”

Esau tried to speak, but found he couldn’t. Grimly, he nodded.

“Good. David, get us out of here.”

David led the way, and the small company rode out before the smoke could seriously alarm the horses. After a few hundred yards, David spared a look back. The smoke clouds steadily grew, and he thought he detected

a faint flicker of fire. Still, by the time anyone saw and tried to fight the fire, they would all be gone. And if no one came, then the fire would burn the house and probably barn to the ground, but would be far enough away from any trees to spread further.

Esau looked back as well, but with considerably more sadness than anyone else.

IV

They made good time and steady progress crossing both the Mississippi river, and the state of Arkansas. Soon, they were riding into Diamond’s farm, just as their provisions were running low. Luckily, Diamond’s parents had fared better than the Sykes family, and welcomed their son’s friends.

“After all, how could I turn down the people who looked after my boy?” Diamond’s father said with a smile

as they all gathered around the parlor of Diamond's house. They shared a round of homemade moonshine, and were in high spirits for it.

"Man, Dad," Diamond corrected, and everyone, even Esau, laughed.

"Diamond's told us that cowboys are in demand," Lucius told the older man. "That still true?"

"Yes," he confirmed. "You can stay here and restock for a while, then make your way to First Ranch. Ask for Buck; he's the main driver out there."

"Great. Thanks."

"Is there anything we can help you with in the meantime?" Esau asked, wanting to be polite.

"Well, if you want to go hunting, we could use some more venison to smoke," Diamond's dad said. "You could use that on your way through the Indian Territory. Just

be back by sundown; there's been a lot of mountain lions lately."

"All right. Brother, you and Horseman can go together," Lucius said. "Darwin and I can go off together, and then Diamond and Shaman. We get back by nightfall, and butcher what we have."

He smirked at the elder Sykes. "You do butcher, right?"

Some of the others snickered. "Lay off me, Lucius," he replied.

"All right, come on," David said, steering Esau away. "Let's get our guns and get moving."

Later on, Esau and David slowly walked through the woods, holding their rifles, and scanning the trees for any signs of deer. The air was still, and the sun was out,

so David figured that spotting any game should be easy. Sure enough, he had spotted some faint tracks and decided to follow them.

“David,” Esau whispered.

“What?”

“About Lucius…”

“Don’t worry about him,” David said. “I know you don’t like him, but if you don’t bother him, he won’t bother you.”

“Are you sure about that?” Esau licked his lips nervously. “I’m not sure…I mean… Is he even sane? The way he lit that fire back home, I thought he was some kind of madman.”

David thought for a second. “Yeah, he probably is,” he agreed. “Or at least at times. But don’t worry; he’s one of us.”

They looked back towards the trail before them. David's face lit up at the sight of a good sized buck grazing a few dozen yards ahead. Taking aim, the brothers fired, and were rewarded by the sight of the buck falling down, stone dead.

They walked up, and tested the deer's weight by lifting the legs. Too heavy for one of them to sling over their shoulders, but no matter. Esau took out a blanket from the small pack he had had on his back. Then the brothers looked around for some sticks that would be long and strong enough to make poles. Finding some, they draped the blanket around and over it to create a makeshift stretcher. This they would use to carry their prize back to Diamond's home. It would make several days worth of jerky.

The rustle and crunch of leaves caused the brothers to quickly look up. When they did, they quickly got to their feet.

Peering at them between two trees was a mountain lion. But not any mountain lion. This one as solid black, and considerably larger than any they had ever seen. Moreover, the gleam in its eyes not only suggested insatiable hunger, but a malevolent intelligence as well. Crafty, sly, and to be feared.

David shouted at it, hoping to startle it away. The animal flinched, but didn’t run, certainly smelling the blood from their own prey.

David stood, and aimed his rifle at the beast. He shot, but missed. However, the lion turned and ran, and the brothers were left alone for the time being.

V

They continued to travel west. By and by, they crossed through the Indian Territory, that lonely stretch of plain that Native Americans had been forced onto when their land had been stolen by Europeans. And that only if they were deemed ‘civilized’ by the invaders. The rest had simply been killed.

“A horrible fate my grandfather’s kin must have suffered,” Shaman remarked one day as they approached a lonely village. “I wonder if this is part of the so called Trail of Tears.”

“What if it is?” Darwin asked. “It’s no different than slavery and the war. Men fight and only the strong survive.”

Shaman grunted. “You know, somehow that’s easier to say about the slaves, since they weren’t any of our families. But these…”

He pointed to the approaching village. They could see several people ambling about, dusty, listless, and sad. It wasn't a work day, so they had nothing to do but remember.

"These are Choctaw," Shaman continued. "What would my grandfather say now, if he could see them? Would he hate me because there's more invaders' blood in me than native?"

"Well, that's just it, Shaman," Lucius said. "You're more akin to the victors than the losers. That makes you better."

"They're still people."

"Yes. And people are animals," Darwin said. "Only two groups that you worry about. Allies or enemies. Will someone else help you or keep you from surviving?"

They rode through the village. The sad people looked up with curiosity upon the party. One asked them a question in Choctaw, and Shaman replied as best he could. The others didn't understand, but the answer seemed to satisfy the natives, and the horsemen passed through without incident.

They took one last look over their shoulders before finally departing.

"Anyone who says there's more is just kidding himself," Darwin told Shaman.

He nodded, and for the last time, looked with pity upon another. Then, he steeled his gaze and they all moved forward.

"Mississippi boys are you?" the rancher called Buck asked the group a few weeks later.

“That’s right sir,” Lucius replied, answering for all of them. “Six able bodied men who can take whatever you give us.”

Buck snorted. “I will show you the ropes,” he said. “And go with you on your first run. Then we’ll see.”

He stood, and led them out back. Behind the ranch house was a wide open prairie where several hundred livestock grazed. David found the scene to have a beauty and charm all its own. Still, the land was desolate and, already wiping sweat from his brow, he suspected that the only two seasons would be hot and hotter. But it would mean steady work, and he hoped his brother didn’t complain.

Luckily all had the sense to keep quiet, and wait for Buck to begin his instruction. The rancher whistled shrilly, and his horse trotted up from the side of the field.

He mounted it, and rode around the house long enough for the men to get on their own rides. Then the company was led into the field.

Buck showed them some basic commands and maneuvers to herd the cattle together. He also spoke to them at length about the northern route to Kansas, the rate at which they would lead their charges, and the dangers of coyotes, mountain lions, and the occasional bandit. Here it would be a harsh world with no second chances. Here, the worst thing would be to get killed or branded a coward.

David really hoped his brother didn't complain.

As it turned out, he needn't have worried. All had had to take their turns herding the charge and all, even Esau, had put in a good enough showing. Now, a few

days out from Buck's ranch, they sat and chatted around a campfire, grateful for one another's company. Even their employer had warmed to them. It looked like they would have a secure future here after all.

David looked up at the clear sky. The temperature had dropped, giving a respite from the heat, and his belly was full. The last war, his harsh father, and burning farm already faded into memory, and he felt closer to content than he had since he couldn't even remember.

A roar off in the distance made the men's heads look up. They stopped eating for a moment, and strained their ears, wondering if the sound would repeat itself.

They were just about to resume their meal when the roar sounded again. This time, it sounded just noticeably closer.

Buck swore, and stood to fetch his gun. The others followed suit, and they also got their horses to form a perimeter around the cattle. David searched the horizon with his eyes, trying in vain to get a glimpse of the predator.

Suddenly, several shots rang out form his left. Esau had fired his gun into the night. The other horses reared up, and the cattle began to try and run.

“Steady!” Buck called out, both to his mount and to the others.

They managed to get their horses under control, but a few cows ran out of the circle. David reacted quickly, and galloped after them. He overtook them, and set out to lead them back to camp.

A roar caused him to look out over his shoulder. In the night, he saw a mountain lion, presumably the one

his brother had tried to shoot. Its eyes appeared to glow a pale, ghostly white within its solid black face. Or was that just the moonlight?

The creature locked eyes with David for a moment. Then, it turned and disappeared into the night. David herded the missing cattle back to the camp. The others were getting things quieted back down.

Esau, however, looked at his brother, wide eyed with fear.

“Did you see it, David?” he asked tensely.

David nodded.

“It was the same lion we saw in Arkansas, wasn’t it?” Esau continued.

“What are you talking about?” Buck asked.

“We saw a black mountain lion while hunting on Diamond’s family’s land,” Esau said. “It just looked at us like it knew what we were thinking. David scared it off, but…”

“Come on, Brother,” Lucius interrupted. “You don’t really think the same cat followed us all the way here, do you? They have their territory, but not that far.”

“I know what I saw,” Esau insisted. “You saw it too, didn’t you David?”

David hesitated. He didn’t want to tell them about the glowing eyes he saw. They would think he was crazier than they suspected Esau of being.

“I don’t know about that either, Esau,” he heard himself say. Esau’s face fell.

“It was dark. It was a lion, though.”

“Well, we’ve scared him off anyway,” Buck said. “Good work keeping the herd together. Let’s take turns keeping watch until morning. We should reach the Kansas station sometime tomorrow.”

They all agreed, and Darwin took the first watch. The others rolled out their sleeping mats and settled in for the night. David slept uneasily, trying not to think of natural predators with unnatural eyes.

The next evening, the men were herding their cattle into a tight pen next to the train tracks. They had arrived in the small but bustling community where the trains would take the animals east to Chicago and other cities for slaughter. All in all, it had been a successful run.

Buck was off finalizing the payment while the rest of them watched herders lead the animals into train cars. Soon, the engine chugged to life, and the smell of burning coal mingled with the smell of animal waste. Then the train noisily started away from the loading pens and towards the horizon.

David and the others looked from the pens to the town beyond. They saw cheap hotels, saloons, and places that looked as though they would cater to more adult needs. Ladies in tight corsets moved about; some of them even cast mischievous smiles at the strangers.

Buck returned with several crisp, clean dollar bills. He motioned for the men to dismount and tie up their horses. Then he divided up the money.

“Well done,” he told them. “You’ve earned your keep for now. Keep up the good work, and we’ll go far together.”

He pointed to the nearby saloons, and other places that catered to vices.

“We’ll stay here tonight, and then head home in the morning. Enjoy yourselves.”

And they did.

VI

Years passed, and several more cattle drives followed. Sure enough, they had all earned both Buck’s trust and his respect. After awhile, he didn’t even always bother accompanying them, and they returned that trust with integrity, always returning the money due their employer.

Unfortunately, their fortune wasn’t to remain so good forever. One year was particularly hard. A drought had severely reduced the grasses and grains used to feed the cattle, which in turn led to fewer and fewer cows.

Buck was fond of them, but was a business man first and foremost. If the cows didn’t fetch a good price at market, then it would mean reduced wages for them all. Perhaps even layoffs for some of them.

Then it finally happened. The trip to Kansas had yielded only a small fraction of the pay they usually returned with. Lucius and Darwin had tried to argue with the wholesaler, but to no avail.

It had been a miserable night in town. None of them had really felt like their usual celebrating, instead feeling that saving the money would offset some of the losses. But they knew. Even restraining themselves wouldn’t be enough.

“Well, Horseman,” Lucius began as the men rode their horses back to Buck’s ranch. “Are we going to talk about this or not?”

“Talk about what?” David retorted. “Buck’s not going to like it, but what can we do? Probably one of us is going to be let go.”

“Surely Buck wouldn’t do that,” Esau protested. “We’ve done well for years. Surely one bad year won’t make a difference.”

“Won’t it?” Lucius replied. “He’s not our friend, he’s our boss. He only seems like a friend when money’s coming in. Take that away, and mark my words, it’ll be every man for himself.”

“It’s always that way,” Darwin agreed. “The weak and the strong fight over the scarce and only the strong survive. That’s life.”

“But maybe it doesn’t have to be that way,” Esau cried. “Maybe we can make up the loss somehow.”

“Doing what?” Diamond asked. “There are no other cattle.”

“And no other jobs for miles around,” Shaman pointed out. “No other ranchers, no spare crops. Nothing.”

Lucius didn’t say anything for awhile, and David wished they would just keep on riding in silence. Clearly, talking about it wouldn’t be getting them anywhere. The day was already uncomfortable as it was, what with the heat and dust. Indeed, off in the distance, he saw a dust cloud gathering strength.

They all did, and saw a stagecoach on the horizon. A trail came through this part of the country, leading travelers further west at a fairly frequent rate. Some of

them appeared quite well to do, with men and women dressed fashionably, and probably never having to worry about the changing fortunes of the cattle country.

“If only we had a fraction of what they did,” David muttered, as they saw the stagecoach go on its way.”

“Sure, Horseman,” Diamond said dryly. “Why don’t we ask them for some help?”

The men enjoyed a brief bitter laugh over this. But Lucius’ eyes gleamed with the gem of an idea.

“Yeah,” he said to himself, as they kept riding home. “Why don’t we?”

“Why would we?” Shaman asked.

They men were all gathered in their bunkhouse that evening. They had returned with their meager gains to

Buck earlier that evening. Sure enough, the rancher hadn’t been happy, and told them he’d have to think long and hard about what he’d do next.

“Because we’re dead broke,” Lucius replied. “Soon, we’ll be out of a job unless we get Buck some help.”

“And you really think this is the answer?” David asked. “Robbing stagecoaches?”

“One stagecoach,” Lucius corrected. “One with enough loot to get the ranch back on track. All we have to do is ride out on the pretence of patrolling the area. Then, when a wealthy looking one passes, we hold it up, and take the loot.”

“What about the people?” David asked.

“David! You can’t be considering this,” Esau protested. “It’s wrong.”

“More wrong than us losing everything?” Darwin asked. “Just shut up and listen.”

“Lawmen are few out here,” Lucius said. “And we scare the people enough not to follow us. They wouldn’t know who we are. And if they try to fight, well…”

He took out his pistol, and looked at it thoughtfully.

“No!” Esau shouted, his eyes widening. He got to his feet. “I’m not killing anybody. I don’t care! I…”

Lucius quickly stood himself, and hit Esau in the mouth. Esau cried out, and David found himself on his feet as well. David and Shaman held Esau back, while Darwin put a hand on Lucius’ shoulder.

“Brother, some days I regret taking you,” Lucius told Esau, although he didn’t try to strike the other man again. “I knew early on, you had the yellowiest belly

here. But you go against us, and I'll stop turning a blind eye to it. Understand?"

Esau wiped his mouth, and scowled at Lucius. Being called a coward was the worst thing one could be called in this place. Bad enough that Esau could've challenged the other man to a duel to defend his honor. Only he never would, and everyone there knew it.

Lucius sat back down, and resumed speaking. "Right. So, we all agree to look for an opportunity?"

His eyes scanned the faces of the other men. Slowly, they all nodded, except for Esau.

"Good. Let's get some rest, then. We'll get up early tomorrow and see what we can find."

"David?" Esau managed at last. But his brother shook his head, and headed for his bunk. Soon, they all

followed suit. While he hated not standing up for his brother, David wasn’t about to go against the gang.

Truth be told, he wasn’t sure he really disagreed anyway.

VII

One morning, their opportunity finally came. David was riding around the range, when he spotted a stagecoach off in the distance. He supposed it would be now or never.

He had his gun by his side, fully loaded. He also had a bandana around his neck that he could easily pull over his lower face. He pulled his hat lower over his eyes, took out a whistle, and blew shrilly. Then he replaced it, moved up the bandana, and took out the handgun. With a flick of the reigns, he began galloping to the stagecoach.

He heard other whistles in the distance, and knew that he had been heard. He saw the stagecoach driver look around, clearly hearing the signals, and fearing the worst.

David saw the driver and also saw the man reaching for a gun. Quick as lightning, David took aim and fired.

The man fell, having been shot between the eyes. David blinked, mildly surprised that it had been so easy. He hadn't killed a man since his time in the Civil War.

Now, old memories came back to him. Yes, during his time in the service, he had not only been good at killing, he had enjoyed it. The power of life and death, that power of God Himself in his own hands, had made him feel more like a man than anything else.

The others appeared, similarly dressed and masked. They surrounded the coach, and shouted. Another man

put out his head, and they all brandished their weapons. He held up his hands, and David, Darwin, and Lucius jumped down.

While Darwin checked the body of the driver, David and Lucius opened the door. A shriek greeted them, and David saw a pretty lady finely dressed cower back into her seat. The man looked at them, trembling with mingled rage and fear.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

Lucius held out a sack. “All of it,” he replied.

The man tried to move forward, but David held up his pistol. He cocked the barrel, and pointed it at the woman’s head. She buried her face in her hands, and the man looked at them all with hate.

But he emptied his pockets and the woman’s purse of several bills and jewels. As he did so, however, he

seemed to be studying the men very carefully, as though trying to get a glimpse of their faces.

He looked at the pistol and David's arm below it. He studied the arms holding the gun and bag as he threw the loot in. Arms that had been tattooed with a distinctive logo.

David and Lucius backed away, and David slammed the door shut. Darwin, meanwhile, had relieved the corpse of its weapon and ammunition. Within moments, they were riding away, having committed their first armed robbery.

VIII

A loud knock sounded at their door. The men looked up and David went over to answer. When he opened it, he saw Buck standing there, arms folded, and a scowl on his face. David opened the door wide to let him in, and

tried to remain calm. Surely he wouldn't know about what happened earlier today. Indeed, how could he?

"Yes sir?" David asked for the whole group.

"Boys, we have a problem," he began. "A man and woman came into town this afternoon. I happened to be there at the bank, settling some accounts. They were shaken up pretty badly. Seems they were ambushed and robbed."

"That's bad," Lucius agreed. "We'll have to be on our guard, it sounds like."

"Yes." Buck walked around the perimeter of the table, where all but David sat. He looked at each one of them. Esau swallowed, and dropped his gaze, but the others managed to remain stone faced.

"The police were called in, to question the poor people," Buck continued. "And one very interesting

detail came out. At least two of the men had a clear tattoo. Something Civil War like."

He reached into his pocket, and calmly got out a pistol. "I didn't say anything there, but I wanted to see just what you knew about it."

David pulled out his own gun, almost by reflex. Buck turned his own weapon on David, and the others cried out and leapt to their feet. Buck took a step back, and tried to brandish his weapon at as many of them as possible.

"You're accusing us without any proof," Darwin protested.

"This stunt may as well be a confession," Buck retorted. "I took you in, because I thought you were honest men. I'm not harboring outlaws!"

“Come on, Buck, be reasonable,” Lucius replied. “We could make it worth your while.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?” he roared, waving his gun back and forth. “I…”

David shot and wounded him. The sense of power and the frustration of the situation consumed him. Why couldn’t they take what they needed? Other people did and the world didn’t seem to mind. Besides, they had tried the honest way, but times were getting harder. What were they supposed to do, just calmly wait it out? And why wouldn’t Buck cooperate? At least they were doing something.

“You… you shot me!” he shouted, collapsing to the ground. He clutched the bleeding wound in his leg, and winced in pain. “You shot me! Don’t you understand that, you bloody…?”

Another shot rang out, putting a second bleeding hole in Buck, this time in the head. He suddenly and forever stopped making any sound at all.

David blinked, and looked around. Lucius lowered his own pistol, and it was smoking. For a moment, all was still, as the men took in the situation.

“I had to,” Lucius said at last, putting away his weapon. “I had to. He’d have turned us in. He…”

“All right,” Darwin cut him off. “So what now?”

Lucius thought a minute. “Well, he probably won’t be missed for at least a few days. Let’s bury him, take whatever we need, and head further west, maybe into one of the territories.”

“Just like that?” Esau asked. “We’ve now killed two people.”

“You and horseman can dig a grave, Brother,” Lucius said with a disdainful look. “The rest of us will gather some things up.”

The others filed out, probably happy to get out of the presence of their betrayal. Esau tried to say something, but his brother lowered his eyes, and looked around the room. He grabbed a blanket from the bunks, and wrapped Buck in it. Then he got another one to mop up the remaining blood as best as he could.

Satisfied, he then lifted one end, and motioned for Esau to take the other. Esau took his end with shaking hands, and almost dropped it. David suspected that the only thing keeping him from doing so was the fear of seeing or touching the corpse.

They got their burden outside, took it several yards away from the house, and went back for some shovels. The digging was hot, long and miserable, and David felt

more regret. After all, Buck had indeed taken them in, and shown them how to live in this harsh environment. If only he had been more willing to work with them, instead of against them.

They finally got their burden in the hole, and covered it as best they could. David and Esau spread dirt around to keep any signs of fresh digging as obscure as possible. Then they headed for the house to help pack.

The men slept very uneasily that night. The weight of their deed had begun to sink in. Even Lucius had admitted that from now on, there would be no simply taking a new job. Now, they were and forever would be outlaws.

Once they found a place to settle into, somewhere they could rob regularly passing coaches, they would have to find a hideout, probably somewhere in the

mountains. It wouldn’t be easy, but it would be the only choice to exist short of turning themselves in, and risk being hung.

Their alert ears heard a pawing outside. David got out of bed, and drew a curtain covering the only window. He gasped at what he saw, and the sound made the others come to the window.

The black mountain lion had returned.

It sat on the precise spot where Buck had been buried. While it made no sound, they could see in the moonlight that its teeth were bared, and it looked straight at them, almost seeming to smile. The eyes were glowing again, and for a moment, they all were frozen. Then they quickly moved from the window, looking for their guns. But when they returned to the window, the cat had vanished. Still, they would find no

rest until the sun rose, and they rode as far away from their crime as they could.

IX

The men rode out into the Texas countryside. Avoiding the town, they rode at a brisk pace. All rode in silence, and David had a lot of time to think. Perhaps too much, for he didn't like the thoughts entering his head.

They had committed murder. Or rather, Lucius had done so. All David had done or intended to do was wound. He had told Esau that Lucius was more than likely insane from time to time but he had been livid enough and brave enough to lead them through some rough times, particularly during the war. He had been the sergeant, and had given the orders to the others. Would such a one ever allow another to lead the group instead?

Morning passed into afternoon, and they stopped by a creek to rest and water their horses. As they did so, David looked around the men, and saw that they were all lost, aimless, and afraid. No one knew what to do, and David swallowed hard.

“Lucius, we need to talk,” he spoke up.

Lucius looked up from where his horse was drinking. “Well?”

“Do you know where we’re going? Or what we’re doing?”

Esau and the others looked up. Lucius frowned. “I told you. We’ll keep going until we find a town where we can stay.”

“But there isn’t any plan,” David protested. “Before we came to Texas, we spent time figuring what we needed to do.”

“Before, we didn’t have a murdered man behind us,” Lucius said. “We don’t have the luxury of waiting now.”

“Why did you kill Buck?” David demanded. “I’d already wounded him. We could have left him, and not had the murder charge.”

“You killed that coach driver, Horseman,” Lucius reminded him, turning back to his horse.

“I remember,” David said. “But that couldn’t definitely be traced back to us. Buck’s murder will.”

Lucius stepped over to David. He was getting tired of being questioned. “We’re all in this together. You can argue who’s more at fault all you want, but there’s no going back. Or maybe you think you can do better?”

“Maybe I can.”

Diamond gasped, and Esau’s jaw dropped. Neither of them would have ever been so bold. Darwin stood by

Lucius while the others gathered close, waiting to see what would happen next.

“What did you say, Horseman?” Lucius asked quietly.

“You heard me,” David replied. “You don’t think, Lucius. You’re answer to everything is lashing out first and thinking later. You know I’m not afraid to kill, but at least I give it some thought first.”

“That’s enough! I commanded you back during the war! You’d not be standing here now if it weren’t for me! None of you would be!”

“The war was lost! You can’t court martial me!”

Lucius swung his fist at David. He ducked, and rushed the other man. Slamming into him, they tumbled over to the ground.

The others shouted and scrambled to pull them apart, while they rolled on the ground, tearing and

clawing at each other. All David's frustration boiled over, and he forgot that Lucius was technically his comrade. He freed his hands, and punched Lucius in both of the eyes. Lucius cursed, and kicked David off.

They both rose, and glowered at each other.

"You think you can take over, Horseman?"

"We need a better leader," David said. "And I'm the one who gave us all the supplies and recruited my brother. We wouldn't be here if not for you? You wouldn't have made it this far if not for me!"

"Your brother's useless! Nothing but a coward!"

David pulled out his pistol. "Don't you ever say that again."

Lucius took out his own weapon. "Tell me when you're leader."

Esau ran in between them. “No! Please! We need each other! Lucius, we’re not friends, but we need each other!”

For a moment, there was silence. Both David and Lucius scowled at each other, panting and trembling with rage and exertion. Now that the initial flare up of temper was beginning to fade, David found himself wondering about the consequences of his actions. True, he was angry with Lucius for his rash action in killing Buck, but now he wondered if he hadn’t gone too far. Could he really lead five other men? Especially with so few options?

“Get back, Brother,” Lucius said at last. “Too late to back away now. I’ve been called out. This isn’t going away, so we deal with it now.”

“Do what he says, Esau,” David said when his brother hesitated. “He’s right. This is dealt with here and now.”

“Let’s be fair about this,” Shaman said. “Put your guns up in the air. When I say, fire at one another.”

Esau hung his head, and stepped away. Both men held their guns in the air. Shaman looked back and forth. Then he shouted, “Now!”

David pointed his gun and fired. Instantly he heard two shouts. One from his opponent and one from himself.

He clutched his shoulder. Blood gushed from it, but Lucius crumpled. David had hit him in the leg.

The men ran towards him. Shaman went over, and pulled out his knife. He motioned for Esau to hold David still while he dug the bullet out of the shoulder. David

winced, but kept from screaming as the bullet was dug out and makeshift bandages were applied.

As Shaman applied the same treatment to Lucius, David realized through the pain that he was now the leader of the group.

Shaman was gathering herbs that he said he'd make into a healing salve for their wounds. While he waited, David studied Darwin's map of the country.

"The area immediately west of us is territory, recently taken from Mexico," he said, pointing it out to the others. They were eating jerky and drinking from the creek.

"What's this small dot here?" he asked Darwin. "It says Ponil."

“I think it must have had a small Mexican garrison at some point,” Darwin told him. “The map’s mostly concerned with military sites. It’d be pretty far-flung too, from the looks of it. See, there’s basically no other settlement listed there north of the border, except for California.”

David took a drink, trying to ignore the pain in his shoulder. “A garrison means that there should be at least a small town between here and there. That’ll mean fresh supplies, as well as a steady train of wagons and stagecoaches, should the need arise. I think we should try heading there.”

The others looked at Lucius, who sat off to the side.

“Don’t look at me,” he told them bitterly. “He’s the leader now. Won fair and square, too. Let’s give him what he wants.”

David nodded, as Shaman brought back some leaves that he crushed in his cup. Adding water, he heated it over the fire, and mixed it with some other stuff in his supplies. When it was ready, the former medic then applied it to the wounds of David and Lucius. Sure enough, it numbed the pain away, and David breathed a little more easily.

He had them douse the fire, and begin to pack up camp. Darwin helped the limping Lucius onto his horse, and David knew that he would have to do something soon to cement his place as leader. Otherwise, they would either turn back to Lucius or the latter would try something.

He hadn't wanted him as leader anymore, but neither did he want a rival. As it would turn out, his opportunity would come sooner rather than later.

They had been riding along the creeks edge for about twenty minutes when a roar caused them to look behind them. The black mountain lion had returned. It moved with slow deadly precision, stalking them, and looking for signs of fear. When those signs didn’t come fast enough, it roared more loudly, causing the horses to rear up in fright.

The men caused their horses to speed up their trotting, and then to gallop swiftly when the lion gave chase. The beast ran so quickly that it seemed almost to float over the rocky ground. David then decided to wade his horse into the stream, hoping that it wouldn’t be too deep.

While nearly coming to the horse’s neck, it was shallow enough that he was able to cross.

“Come on!” he shouted to the others when he made it to the other side.

They followed and, to his immense relief, the lion didn’t. Then another problem came up.

Lucius fell off his horse into the water. Because his leg was injured, he had a much harder time staying in balance. Now, he thrashed and shouted for help, unable to even swim steadily.

The others hesitated, and David jumped off his horse.

“Get over to the other side!” he shouted.

“What about Lucius?” Darwin demanded.

“I’ll help him.”

He waited for the men to get over safely. Then he dove into the water, and swam out to the struggling man. While Lucius should’ve been able to simply put his feet on the ground, his weakened state and the strong

current worked against him. He was drifting away from them until David swam up.

Lucius flailed and tried to grab him, but David swam under the surface and locked his arm around the other man’s torso. Then he reached out with his other arm, and paddled to shore.

As he neared the edge, Diamond and Darwin helped pull him back onto dry land.

“Thank you, Horseman,” Lucius said. “Thank you.”

David, amazed that his own arm had held up, nodded back. The men all looked on their new leader with approval, and David was glad that that problem, at least, seemed solved.

As to the other, the lion growled, but declined to follow. It ran back the way it came. David sincerely

hoped that he would be spared ever having to face it again.

X

The countryside became more desolate the further west they went. Only a few cacti and small streams could be seen after a while. They took to riding in the early morning and early evening while trying to avoid the heat of the day.

Eventually, they came to a canyon that seemed to match what they had seen on the map.

“This must be it,” Darwin said. “It would be perfect shelter from the sun and other people, not to mention well hidden.”

“Let’s go, then,” David said.

They rode down between the rock walls. To their relief, the sunlight was less direct, but still the heat

never really let up in this part of the country. David reflected on how people would say it was a dry heat, as if that made it more tolerable. Ovens were dry heat too, he thought sardonically.

The canyon widened and while one side remained relatively sheer, the other side to their right became somewhat less steep, and rocks provided a way for climbing back to the canyon walls' top.

"We made it!" Esau cried out, pointing ahead. "We're here!"

They all looked ahead. A fort greeted them. It was about two stories tall, made of wood, and looked to be at least thirty years old. They rode around the perimeter to get a better idea of the size. In its prime, David guessed that it had housed about thirty soldiers. They saw a hitching post, and unloaded their horses. Then they walked inside.

A musty odor greeted their nostrils. Looking around, they saw no furniture, and knew that it had been abandoned years ago. They walked through about half a dozen rooms, and did find an old water cask with some stale water still inside. The dry air kept things intact far longer than the areas east of the Mississippi would.

They noted an empty armory, empty storage rooms, and barracks. They also saw a ladder leading to the upper levels, mostly lookout rooms to spot approaching horses and men. They went back outside, and found a path among some of the rocks.

Picking their way through them, they found a way to get up the right wall to the top of the canyon. Before them, the empty rocky desolation of New Mexico spread. At their feet was another ravine, leading into a crevasse.

“Yes,” David said quietly, feeling that he had come home, perhaps for the first time since coming to this part of the country. “Yes, this will be our home.”

“What next then, David?” Esau asked.

He took one more look, and then began to pick his way down the rocks.

“We get some quick cash.”

A coach with a lone rider sped through the countryside. This one contained no passengers, but did have several boxes of gold and silver coins bound for the bank of Ponil. The driver sped his horses on, eager to have the long trek over. He never felt at ease, alone out here, vulnerable to the forces of nature or the forces of lawlessness. He had been held up once, and never wanted to go through that whole thing ever again.

Now, he had two guns at his side, ready to grab at a moment's notice. He prayed he would never have to use them. So far, so good. He could imagine a hotel in Ponil right now.

A dust cloud entered his peripheral vision. He kept one hand on his reigns, and with the other, took up his gun. White knuckles tightened over the barrel, and he hoped it would only be wild animals.

But the cloud gave way to six horses riding side by side to him with purpose. As they came closer, the riders were revealed to have bandanas over their faces, and pistols in their hands. No peaceful night in Ponil would come for him now. But he would not go without a fight.

He shot at the men wildly. But he was still too panicked to aim carefully, and the riders continued on. Worse, there were six of them to his one.

Shots rang out, and the man's vision grew dark. He had the vague notion of toppling off the coach while it continued on. Then, he knew no more in this world.

David and Esau skillfully rode up to the still moving coach. With their experience training horses, they were able to gradually slow down and corral the animals. As their fellows joined them, David decided to unhitch and turn them loose. He had no use for them. Nor did he want to leave or kill them, seeing no reason to do so.

He watched them go, and then opened the coach, hoping that there wouldn't be passengers this time.

There wasn't, but what was there made them all shout for joy. Gold. Enough to last for a long time. Enough to get what they wanted for at least the next few

years. Any doubts that the others had about David as leader was dispelled by the sheer size of the haul.

The next day found David and Esau at Ponil's general store. They had left the coach, brought the money back to the fort, and had rested the rest of the day.

That morning, they had thought about what they would need, and David took his brother into town to buy extra food and blankets. They had decided to only take a very small amount of the money, so as not to arouse suspicion. The bank would no doubt already be missing their deposit.

As they paid for their goods, a man walked over to them. He watched them as they paid, watched their money change hands, and took note of all details. David

and particularly Esau felt nervous, but kept their eyes down, and hands steady as they completed their purchase.

“Good afternoon,” the man said, but with only a superficial friendliness.

“Sir,” David replied, with a quick nod.

An uncomfortable pause ensued, while the brothers gathered their things.

“I’m Galligan,” the man continued. “Marshall Galligan. I keep things safe for people here. You’re new, aren’t you? What’s your names?”

“Esau Sykes,” Esau blurted out. David elbowed him to stay calm.

“David,” he finished.

“Looking for work?” Galligan asked.

David slung his pack over his shoulder. “Might be.”

Galligan paused. “Course, you seem to be doing fairly well,” he remarked offhandedly.

“Last job paid off,” David said, with equal offhandedness. “Nice meeting you, Marshall.”

He turned to go, but Galligan put a hand on his shoulder. David turned around, and looked him in the eye.

“There’s a shipment that’s supposed to come in for Ponil bank. It’s late. It could be nothing, but…”

He took his hand off David’s shoulder before David could shake it off. Then he walked out of the store.

“Watch yourself, boys.”

Esau looked at David, and David returned his brother's gaze. Indeed, they would need to watch themselves.

XI

"Sykes!"

David didn't bother turning around, but instead looked in the mirror, over the bar where he was sitting. In the ten or so years since Buck's murder, the group had made their way out further west, eventually settling in the small village of Ponil, New Mexico territory. They had continued committing periodic robberies to get by, and eventually aroused a decent sized cache at their desert hideout.

Naturally, their activities hadn't gone unnoticed by the law. Over the years, various sheriffs and marshals had tried to take the gang down, but to no avail. They

had all, including Esau, had had plenty of practice with the gun.

David studied the mirror in front of him, looking over the head of the frightened bartender and showing the door to the saloon. A young man, clean shaven, and probably no older than early twenties, scowled in his direction. He had the star of a deputy pinned to his shirt, and a new revolver at his side. A new lawman, David thought. A new tenderfoot, ready to prove his manhood by taking down the infamous desperado David Sykes.

David took another drink of whisky, not bothering to either reply or turn around. The bartender took a slow, barely perceptible step to the side. Around him, the other patrons looked form the outlaw's back to the deputy's face.

“I’m talking to you, Sykes!” the deputy said. “Turn around, and face me!”

David drained his glass, and acted as though he were hunching over his drink. In reality, he was bringing his hands closer to his coat, so that he could reach the gun stashed din its inside pocket.

“Don’t play deaf with me, Sykes!” the lawman continued. “You’re wanted in both the territory and state of Texas for armed robbery and murder. Today it ends for you! Turn around; you’re under arrest!”

His hand reached the gun just as he decided that the man talked too much.

“Or we can have a showdown here and now!” his opponent continued.

David looked up, but still didn’t turn around. Instead, he studied the man’s reflection in the mirror.

“How about it?” the young man asked. Emboldened by Sykes’ lack of response, he took a step forward.

Quick as a snake, David pointed his gun over his shoulder and fired without even trying. The shot got him in the forehead, and he toppled to the ground, dead before impacting the floor.

There was commotion around him, and finally David did stand and turn around. He was barely aware of the people around him, some making a quick exit, and others merely watching the killer intensely.

But to David, that was the end of the matter. No dramatic showdowns, no witty banter, no gloating, no remorse. Just life and death.

Once, he had been exhilarated by killing, feeling as manly as this fool had tried to. But now, he didn’t really care one way or another. It just was the order of things.

Darwin had said it all along. Natured favored the strong and weeded out the weak. All so the strong could pass their strength to their children and the whole thing would start over again.

The bartender timidly cleared his throat, and offered David a second drink. David shook his head, waved it away, and reached into his pocket. Finding some coins, he threw them on the bar counter and walked outside, stepping over the corpse in the room.

Sometimes, he wondered why he even bothered paying. After all, they could take whatever they pleased. But maybe that was just it. Because they could take money anytime, they might as well spare some here and there, to stay on the relative good side of at least some people.

The gang realized, of course, that they couldn’t press matters too far, lest they have to fend off an

endless succession of posses and lawmakers. So they adopted a few rules. They never robbed in town, and only killed in self defense. Furthermore, while not above visits to the brothels, they never hurt or killed women or children. So far it had kept them from being too hunted.

But nothing would last forever, David supposed, as he mounted his horse and rode towards their hideout. So they kept on guard at all times. They had to. It was life or death.

XII

A few days later, David and his friends came back to the same saloon. It had been a long week; they had robbed two different parties, and had some extra money to spend. So they decided a night in town would be a

good way to relax, starting with a drink at their usual table.

This time, however, they received the less than pleasant surprise of finding someone else occupying their space. An old man sat alone, eating a small meal of bread, and washing it down with nondescript red wine. From his shabby dress, David supposed him to be some sort of prospector, although there wasn't much gold or silver around Ponil.

Still, they didn't care to socialize, and went to their table to clear him out.

"Hey! Old man," David said.

The man looked up, and David saw that he owned the brightest and most clever set of blue eyes he had ever seen. The eyes looked the man up and down, and seemed not only to stare at them, but through them.

They all felt somehow exposed, a feeling no one liked, especially the outlaws.

“Yes?” he asked with a pleasant, but almost wry tone. Certainly not one of anger or fear.

“This is our table, old man,” he told the stranger. “Sit somewhere else.”

The man reached down, and retrieved a bag at his feet. At first, David thought he was leaving, but the man merely set it on the table in front of him. Then he gestured to the other vacant seats around him.

“There are plenty of seats,” he pointed out. “Why don’t you join me?”

Lucius then spoke up. “I don’t think you’re hearing us. This is our private table. Move!”

The old man took a sip of his drink, and regarded them thoughtfully.

“And if I do, then you won’t harm me? I’m not so sure.”

“Do you know who we are?” Lucius demanded.

“The type who would strike me whether I obeyed you or not. Just to prove you were in power.”

The man took another drink, and a bite of bread. “The question is, who are you trying to prove it to? Me? Or yourselves?”

“All right…”

Lucius took a step forward, and the whole place seemed to tense up. The man calmly knocked over the sack, and several gold nuggets fell out.

David held out his hand to stop Lucius from advancing. They all regarded the gold with mingled curiosity and greed. Pure, unadulterated gold. Enough

to pay for provisions and pleasures for weeks, probably months.

They had a rule against violence in town, except for self defense. But this easy target, and this much gold…

The man's eye went to that of the bartender's. "A round of drinks for these gentlemen, sir," he said. "I think they'll be joining me."

The bartender nodded, and the man gestured to the seats. "Let's talk," he suggested.

They all looked at each other. Clearly, Lucius still wanted trouble, but David sat down next to the man. There was something about his strange words and demeanor, something that not only intrigued him, but also stirred something in him that he couldn't quite identify.

The others gathered around while the bartender took the spilled nuggets by way of payment. The old man then reached into his bag, and passed out another handful to the outlaws.

“Do you have a name?” David asked.

He man chuckled softly. “I do.”

But he didn’t offer it, and Lucius frowned, getting angry again.

“I have a proposition for you,” the old man continued, getting to his point. “I’ve found a cache of gold in the mountains, a few days from here. But I’m just one man, and can’t carry or protect it myself. Why not join with me? I’d give each of you a share, more than you could ever get on your own.”

“That easy, huh?” David asked.

“That easy.”

It sounded too good to be true. Sure, the gold was here, and one man against six seemed to put the odds in their favor. Still, that assumed he was indeed telling the truth when he claimed to be alone.

The old man seemed to read David's mind, or at least his face. "Why not just see what I have? Ride out with me, and be the judge. I'll ride in your midst, so if you're afraid of an ambush, I wouldn't be able to get away."

"You think we're afraid of you?" Lucius demanded.

"You're life would be forfeit if you tried to double cross us," David warned.

"I'll take the chance," the old man assured him. "How about you?"

XIII

An hour later, the men rode their horses out of town, the old man in their midst. They had agreed to his terms, and their new employer proposed that they leave at once. He didn't feel comfortable leaving his cache unattended for long, lest some rival prospector would try to stake out his own claim.

"Head east, past the old monastery," the old man told them. He rode on a donkey in the middle of their horses, and seemed to be an awkward, ungainly rider. David could almost have laughed, had his ability to laugh not dried up a long time ago.

"We'll need to stop by our camp first, won't we?" Esau asked. "We'll need provisions."

"Well, maybe you should check first, and see what you need," the old man said, scratching his beard.

They slowed down, and took his advice. David opened his pack, and blinked in surprise. Several provisions of food were there, along with utensils and material for starting a fire. He hadn't packed any of this. Their hideout was only a few hours away, and wouldn't have required a lot of supplies for just going into town.

"Hey, where did this come from?" Esau asked, having discovered the same thing. Indeed, they all did, and the old man smiled slightly.

"Good. We can get going then. Should be a campsite that we can reach by nightfall. Just keep riding with the sun to your back."

David and the others obeyed. The man winked, and began humming a tune as they rode off.

That evening, they found a clear, flat space to make camp. Lucius had started a fire, while Diamond and Shaman roasted meat over the burning coals. David and Esau grabbed some smaller portions of other food to be divided up. When it was ready, the outlaws split the food, and offered a portion to the old man.

“May I say a prayer before we eat?” he asked.

Lucius sneered. “Praying for deliverance?”

“Let him,” David replied. “He’s paying our way.”

“Just pray silently,” Darwin said.

He did, and the outlaws ate in awkward silence. Some of them had never prayed at all, while others hadn’t in a long time. David had thought little of God, his thought only being on the here and now.

He looked up, and regarded the stars as he ate. Once again, he felt like he had never really done so

before. There was awe and majesty there, and for just one moment, he thought beyond his hard life, or about the blood on his hands or the crimes he had committed.

“Can you really look up there,” the old man said into the silence. “And say there is no Creator behind Creation?”

“Sure, my nurse told me all those stories,” Darwin said. “But when you grow up, you know better. Besides, I’ve been to college. I might not look like it, but I’m an educated man, and not just reading and writing.”

“What did you learn there?” the old man asked.

“Same thing the last war taught me,” Darwin said. “The same thing being on the run taught me. Life is a struggle for survival. We’re all animals, every one. All that,” he pointed up to the sky. “It just is. People looked at the stars, the other animals, the weather, and just

imagined gods and spirits controlling it. Because they knew no science."

The old man shook his head. "That's the school answer, I guess. But tell me, why would ancient men look at natural forces and think a person, or spirit, or god was behind it?"

"Because to them it was self evident," Darwin replied.

"Was it? It is to us, because the idea of a god or gods is familiar. Even if you don't believe, it's not really strange to you that people would say an intelligent being made nature, man, and such things as morality and justice.

"But why did those early men do so? Why, having no literature or history to draw from, did they?"

"Well?" Darwin asked.

“Such a notion could only have come to the first men if the first men were formed by, and knew God face to face. Before they fell.”

“Right. Before the snake talked to them,” Lucius laughed. “Yeah, I heard that one as a kid, too.”

“Without God, all is meaningless. Even yourself. Even your very thoughts are useless atoms dancing. Denying God, atheism, defeats itself.” He raised his eyebrows. “Or didn’t they teach that at the university?”

“You watch it, prospector,” Lucius warned. “You’re paying us to mine gold, not hear a sermon.”

Before the man could reply, a low growl came out in the darkness. The men jumped up and the horses snorted.

“Mountain lion, from the sound of it,” the old man said. “Looking for prey. Always looking for prey.”

They hadn’t seen one in years. Not since the night of Buck’s murder. They hadn’t liked to talk or think about it, but none of them would ever forget the night where they had seen the glowing eyes in the night. Sinister, unnatural eyes.

Like the pair they saw in the distance now.

“It’s him,” Esau whispered tensely, standing close to David. “He’s found us.”

“It can’t be,” David whispered back. “It's not possible.”

But it was. From the light of their fire, and the light of the stars, they saw the black shape of a powerful wildcat stalking them. Its eyes burning like embers, its gaze one of hunger. It had come for them; all felt it.

“You get out of here, old scratch!” their employer shouted, startling them. They whirled around, and saw

the old man grabbing a burning log from the fire. He walked past them, brandished the light in the dark shape's direction, and yelled again.

The lion gave a roar, and the man took another step forward. "These aren't all yours! Go!"

The cat roared once more, but then turned and ran. Soon, it was lost to sight, gone as quickly as it came. Or so it seemed. David's eyes scanned the horizon nervously, feeling that the lion was still out there, just out of view.

The man lowered his stick, and walked back into the circle. He threw the stick back on the fire, and resumed his eating. Looking up, he saw that the outlaws were still scanning the horizon.

"Don't worry. He won't bother you with me here."

If only they could feel so confident.

The next morning, Shaman approached their employer as he pointed ahead at the route where they were headed.

“Yes?” the man asked, turning around before Shaman could even speak.

Shaman swallowed, finding it hard to meet those eyes head on. Still, the man had been having a strange effect on them all. An effect that caused them to ask the type of questions they hadn’t in years.

“I was thinking about the conversation you and Darwin had last night,” he began. “It sounds as if you’re against science and reason.”

“I don’t think so,” the man replied. “Again, I say that in order to know anything, one has to believe at least one thing, namely, one’s own self, is more than the

matter that makes it. Besides, I feel those who try to replace God with science, rather than those who recognize both, fall into two errors. Either they feel that nothing exists beyond what man can sense or measure, or they feel that science covers everything."

"You don't think it does?" Shaman asked.

"No. I do not. What is science? Is it not just the observation and reproduction of regular patterns in nature? The supernatural is above and beyond nature, although the heavens do declare the glory of God."

"Something else about all that bothers me," Darwin said, walking forward. He had been listening and couldn't resist rejoining the conversation.

"God told us not to eat from a tree that gave knowledge," he told the old man. "And doing so was the reason for what you'd call the Fall. Sounds to me like

God just wanted us all to stay foolish. What do you say to that?”

“The tree in Eden didn’t give knowledge in general,” the old man corrected. “Just knowledge of good and evil. Particularly the knowledge of how to work evil. There’s the difference.”

Darwin grunted, spat on the ground, and didn’t immediately answer. So the old man continued.

“Think about it. How much human knowledge exists, or needs to exist because of sin and death? Medicine exists because of disease. Machines exist to make hard toil and bad weather more bearable. Economics exist because of scarcity and greed. Politics because of power struggles. History to record wars and intrigues. Art and literature to inspire people to strive for better than what they see in the world. Essentially everything, save for basic natural science and theology.”

“So then, God does prefer us ignorant,” Shaman said.

“No. Knowledge is necessary because the world is fallen. But if it wasn’t, well, that’s another story. Either way, knowledge of God through Jesus is the only hope for anything beyond the world.”

Darwin took out his pistol, and held it up. “I have my savior here,” he said. “That’s all I need to know.”

He walked away, and after a moment, so did Shaman. The old man didn’t attempt to argue further. The others, including David, just kept staring ahead in silence.

XIV

David looked up the mountain from where they were to leave the horses. The summit could be seen far up, although he had to squint to keep the sun out.

Ponil was several days behind them, although they could still glimpse it at the edge of the horizon. Nearer was a smaller mountain that had the area's Franciscan monastery. That meant this mountain could only be the site of the fabled ruins of Koya.

It was a local legend in the area. Before the coming of the Europeans to the Americas, an ancient shamaness of the Anasazi had experienced dreams and visions that foretold the Christian account in the Bible of God becoming man, dying, and returning to life. Theologians and skeptics alike had debated the tale, but it was no secret that the Native Americans of this particular area had quickly converted to the Christian faith. The monks of the Franciscan monastery had mostly been made up of descendants of the original inhabitants, and they held the ruins to be sacred. Still, David had never heard of

any type of treasure here, so he asked the old man if he was sure this was the place.

“Oh, yes. Great treasure is here,” the man assured them. “Follow me up the small dirt trail. That will take us to what was once the main house.”

They started up the trail. It was slow progress as the group picked its way through the rocks, sometimes stumbling, but managing to avoid a fall.

Overhead, the sun blazed, and when they reached the huge alcove in which the ruins lay, they rested a minute. They sat down, and took long drinks out of their water, both grateful, and somewhat confused that it had held up.

Indeed, none of their provisions had run low since their mysterious employer had recruited them. Every morning, when they had checked their packs, they found

them to be as fully stocked with food and water as they had been the night before. At first they suspected a trick, but that made no sense, given that the man was alone.

Besides, neither David nor any of the others could deny that, despite the heat and normal hardships of such a journey, they felt physically better than they had in years. All of them walked with a noticeably lighter gait, and they found their sleep to provide wonderful rest. Even with the sighting of the lion a few days ago.

“Come on, and I’ll take you to the main hall,” the man told them. They stood, and looked behind them. The ruins of multiple stone houses stood underneath a rock ceiling several hundred more feet up. The alcove or cavern in the mountain stretched far enough back that the sun was blocked out. For the first time that day, they saw shadows.

At the far left corner of the largest building, the outlaws saw a half dug hole. They walked over and to their delight, saw a pile of dusty coins. Lucius whooped excitedly, jumped into the hole, and began grabbing fistfuls of gold.

“This is worth ten stagecoach raids!” he cried, letting the coins trickle through his fingers. “Easier to get too!”

Darwin handed Lucius a bag, and the latter began scooping gold into it. David turned to the old man.

“how did you find this? What made you look here?”

The man shrugged. “The people here left in response to droughts and raids by enemy tribes. They couldn’t carry or burn everything, so they hid some things. Probably hoping to if not return here, to at least retrieve it someday. Only they never did.”

Because the hole was only waist deep, the other outlaws jumped in to scoop up loot of their own. Only David, Esau, and the old man hung back. The brothers looked at each other, sharing the same unspoken thought. The whole situation seemed strange. Almost too convenient. How could loot remain hidden so long, when the ruins had always been in plain view of the westward settlers? Sure, the native people and monks considered the site sacred, but when had sanctification ever deflected greed?

David looked up to the cave ceiling, and around. The space was wide open, so that it would be difficult to be penned in by any ambush, if trap it was. He glanced to the old man, but as he was watching the others, David made another few steps towards the path, to see if he could see anyone approaching. Esau followed in silence.

When they gazed over the plain from whence they had journeyed, they saw a startling change. The valley, formerly barren, had now grown fertile with cultivated plants. Furthermore, people were in the valley, tilling the fields. Beautiful robust people with dark hair, dark eyes, and golden skin, they went about their business and seemed to take no notice of the men now raiding their home.

David heard the sounds of laughter, and looked to the side. A small boy and girl ran through the field, hand in hand. The adults smiled slightly, but let the children play. David then turned to Esau, who clearly saw the same thing.

“We’re trapped, David,” he whispered tensely. “What do we do now?”

“Get the others,” he whispered back, drawing his gun. “They’ll not stop us without a fight.”

Esau ran back and David crouched down, trying to get out of sight as much as possible. But the people paid no attention to him.

“What is it?” Diamond’s voice asked behind him.

David whirled around, and saw his men with the old prospector.

“Get down!” he hissed at them. “Can’t you see we’re…”

“What?” Lucius demanded, also not whispering.

“David!” Esau cried out. “They’re gone!”

David stood, and looked. Esau was right. The valley was as it had been before. Hot, barren, and empty. He put away his gun, and looked around.

“You all right?” Lucius asked.

“I…Esau, you saw them, right?”

“Yes. A whole group of them,” Esau confirmed. “Right here.”

“You both have been in the sun too long,” Darwin snorted.

David gave the old man a look, but their guide merely shrugged and turned to walk back to the ruins. “Some explorers of the ruins are said to experience visions.”

“If you believe in that sort of thing,” Darwin said.

“Still…perhaps it would be best to get out of here before nightfall,” Diamond suggested.

David agreed, and as they headed back, he instructed them to get their shovels and search for any other signs of buried treasure. David walked down the row of front dwellings, looking for a sign of anything that

might be of value. About half a dozen doors down, he saw something thrown in the corner of a room.

Entering the doorway, he knelt down, and picked up a comb. To his dismay, he saw that it wasn't composed of gold or jewels, having been simply carved from wood. Still, he could tell that it had been lovingly, carefully made. It had been smoothed and sanded so that it would never splinter or crack and the color was warm and rich. Whoever had made it had taken great care in doing so.

"It's a gift," he heard himself saying into the silence. Somehow, he simply knew.

"For you, Koya," a man's voice said.

David stood and whirled around. The room was now occupied by a man and a woman. While now adults, he could recognize them as the children he had seen

outside. He called out, but they seemed unable to see or hear him.

The man was giving the woman, Koya, the comb, and she smiled in gratitude.

“It is beautiful,” she told him.

“I love you, Koya,” the man said. “Will you become my wife?”

“Yes.” She stood and took his hand. They walked to the doorway, and David tried to move forward and block their way. But they just walked through him. He knew then that he was in a vision.

He followed them out, and he found himself in an intact version of the city. People were gathered in the field once more, and as he stood at the edge of the cave, he saw Koya being wed to her warrior by some type of priest.

David blinked, and the desolate valley and ruins returned. He looked over his shoulder to see the other men digging haphazardly around the original hole. In silence, he watched them for a long time. Something not unlike remorse at tearing into a place that had once meant much to a people long ago. A place that had been home and that was still sacred to many. A place they were desecrating for what? A few coins?

The other holes yielded no results, and David signaled for his men to take a rest. He looked around them. They were hot, sweaty, and would soon grow impatient if more loot didn't turn up soon. He knew them, and knew that none but Esau would give any credence to his visions. And they had come a long way, so while he hated to desecrate the site, he didn't want to leave empty handed.

“Where else would gold be stored?” David asked the old man. “You’ve been here before. You must have some ideas.”

The stranger looked thoughtful. “Perhaps in the inner halls. Follow me.”

He led them single file into one of the doors. As David walked through, his eyes began to water. Wiping his face with his hand, he looked ahead into another vision.

Koya was standing before a wall, holding a clay jar with some kind of dye or paint in it. She was working frantically to complete an image, but of what, David oddly couldn’t tell. He could only see that she was in a hurry.

“Koya, come. We must go,” her husband said, coming into view.

She turned, and David could see that years must have passed. Her hair had a few wisps of grey, and both she and her husband now had more lines in their faces. But her eyes still shone bright and her movement had not slowed or stiffened.

“I come shortly,” she replied. “I have but one more line to draw. There.”

“Your visions have come to us for years,” he said. “Visions of danger. Visions of harvest. Visions of the true god.”

“That is why we leave,” she said, turning to take in the room for what she knew would be the last time. “The times change. Enemies come, and after that…strange men with strange ways. Perhaps some of our children, or our children’s children will gaze upon the city again, but us? Never.”

“Why finish the mural then?” he asked as they left, and David’s eyes watered once more.

The outlaw wiped his eyes and stumbled.

“David?” he heard Esau ask.

He looked p, and the vision had faded. Once more, the city was but an empty ruin, and he was with his men. But as a whisper, he heard a final word from the shamaness, Koya.

“Those who come after shall see.”

“David?” Esau asked again. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” he replied, not telling the truth, but not knowing how to answer either. “Let’s go.”

But as the words echoed through his mind, once more he wondered what, or who they were meant for.

All were silent as they made their way deeper into the ruin. David reflected that some places and some experiences were preferably allowed to speak for themselves, as no words could do them justice. Indeed, any real attempt to talk about how he felt would come across as hollow, a cheap copy of the real place and the real feelings.

What exactly was it he felt? Something like fear, something like awe, something like excitement, and something else. Something that tugged at the edge of conscious thought, and made him forget all about gold or other ill gotten gains.

Then, he frowned at his own thoughts. They were so strange and foreign to him, that he wondered what was happening. His heart was beating fast, yet his breath was deepening. His vision grew dimmer the further

away from direct sunlight they moved, yet his hearing and sense of smell seemed stronger.

He sniffed the air, and could sense a pungent, yet not unpleasant musk in the stones. He heard a faint clacking noise, and looked to his right. A scorpion scurried along the floor, but he didn't have a lot of time to study it. Presently, they entered a large room. On the far wall, they could just make out some paintings put there by the builders, so long ago. It was the chambers of Koya; David could tell immediately.

"Look at the paintings. And you will see," the old man said.

David led the way, looking intently in the dim light. He saw the outline of a chalice, a man shaped figure rising above a cloud, and a cross shape in the middle.

“God became man to die for the sins of all,” the old man said behind them. As he did, they sensed the light getting better and supposed that he lit a torch. “For to be saved out of this world, belief in God and good work isn’t enough. There must be repentance, allegiance given. There must be no question of whom you serve.”

The room grew brighter, and they noted another image. Beside the cross was the drawing of a fleeing black lion.

“But how does this work among those who haven’t heard?” the man continued. The light got even brighter, and they had to turn around.

The man himself was the source of the glow. His clothes and face had turned a bright white, and his eyes glowed like fire. Behind him were other lights, stars, wheels, and things like eyes, all expanding and brightening.

“Know that if they are saved, it is though that same grace, not works. The people here have faced their judgment. Now face yours.”

It grew brighter still, and they screamed. David had the sense that some of his fellows ran back out of the door, but he dared not. It would mean passing by the man.

The light grew, and with it, David’s vision.

XV

Marshall Galligan rode his horse through the dusty streets of Ponil, patrolling his city for any signs of trouble. Although it had been several days since Sykes’ gang had last been seen, he took no chances. After David Sykes killed his deputy, he was determined more than ever to bring the wily criminals to justice.

He looked up at the dusty road leading out of town and received a surprise. A lone man was stumbling and staggering his way towards the town. Frowning, he turned his horse and went out to meet the stranger.

As he approached, he looked at the man, and knew from his face and arm that it was none other than a member of the outlaws. He believed it was the one they called Darwin.

He looked as if he had been walking through the area on foot for days. His skin was beet red and cracked, and his clothes were soiled and caked in dust. His eyes were glazed and facing the sky and his lips worked their way around his mouth as though trying to form words.

“You!” the marshal shouted. He drew his weapon, and aimed it at the outlaw. Darwin looked back, squinting and trying to focus. When he recognized the

marshal, his face seemed to light up, and he smiled broadly.

“Well, well,” he replied. “If this don’t beat all!”

“You’re under arrest,” Marshall Galligan continued, cocking the hammer on his pistol. “Believe me; I’d love to take you in dead. But I’ll settle for alive if you come quietly.”

Darwin laughed loudly, and drew his own pistol. He staggered, as if drunk, and laughed even harder.

“Don’t try it,” Galligan warned.

But Darwin merely pointed his gun in the air, fired several shots, and fell to the ground, continuing to laugh. From the saloon, Galligan heard men shouting in surprise. As he jumped off his horse and approached Darwin, a crowd of onlookers filed out into the street.

Darwin rolled on the ground, his hysterical laughter mingled with tears. He tossed away his gun, and raised his hands.

“I’m done for, aren’t I?” Darwin asked the approaching lawman. “Well. To everything there is a season. A time of war, and a time of peace. A time to be born and a time to die. Solomon said that, and he’d know.”

Darwin laughed again, and wiped his tear streamed face. Galligan frowned, put away his gun, and knelt down. What gibberish was all this?

“On your feet,” he said, pulling the delirious man up. “You’re under arrest.”

“You know, I went to college once,” Darwin continued. “Oh yes, I did. Learned all kinds of stuff.

Learned the Bible, but was taught that it was just literature. Bedtime stories of days gone by.”

He sniffed, and looked at the marshal. For a moment, the glazed look left his eyes, and was replaced with sadness and deep emptiness.

“Have you ever had everything you thought you knew turn out to be totally wrong?”

He reached up, and cupped the marshal’s face in his hands. Tears welled up in his eyes again.

“I thought I knew. I thought it was all just a struggle. The things I took, and the people I killed… none of it was personal. You know that.”

“Get off!” Galligan said, pushing him away. Several men had now gathered around, watching the strange encounter unfold. “You’re crazy. How long have you been wandering in the sun anyways?”

Darwin held up a finger to cut him off. “Yes, yes, the wandering. Went from the mountains, the ruins of Koya. Nice place.”

He smiled, and any doubts that the outlaw was mad were dispelled by that crazed grin.

“Spirits dwell there. Spirits who tell all. Spirits who shatter all illusions. I only wanted to go back to the south canyon, the old outpost where we all lived. Needed to think. But, no. No time. I was being chased by that…that…”

He looked over his shoulder once. His eyes widened, as though seeing something they could not. Then he let off an earsplitting scream, causing the crowd to jump. After that, his eyes rolled up in his head, and he collapsed. Marshall Galligan knelt down, and felt for a pulse. It took only a moment to confirm that Darwin was dead.

“Marshall?” one of the onlookers asked uncertainly. The marshal stood, took off his hat, and wiped the sweat from his brow. None could have imagined that an encounter with one of the Sykes gang would have such a bizarre unexpected ending.

“Get the coroner,” he said at last. “Then assemble a posse. You heard what he said. If any of that was true, we may finally be rid of the Sykes gang.”

XVI

David awakened to find himself in a dimly lit room. He looked around, and saw that he was in a bedroom of sorts. Nearby, a man dressed in robes sat, watching him. When he saw that David was alert, he nodded.

“You’re awake. Good. I thought you wouldn’t survive. You had been in the sun for some time.”

David tried to lift his head. The monk came over and propped him up into a sitting position. He saw that both his gun and his clothes had been taken. He had been dressed in a loose tunic, and his upper body had had cold cloths applied to counter some of the sun.

He tried to speak, but no words came. The monk motioned for him to be quiet, and then raised a cup of water to David's lips. For a long time, David drank. The monk brought him more water, to counter his dried up condition. For a long time, he didn't question either his surroundings, or his host. It just was. No past, no future, and no one else. Just the simple act of being refreshed by water.

Slowly, however, time and memory crept back in. He remembered who he was, and wondered how he got here. He wondered about his friends, and where they were? Had they been on a robbery?

He frowned, and stopped drinking. No, they had gone to the ruins of Koya. An old man had led them there for some reason, and had shown them…

Shown them…

His eyes widened.

Everything.

The man had been the Son of God himself. He had shone with a radiance that surpassed any sun. For even the stars themselves were the mere product of His thought. All of time, all of creation, could be seen in his eyes of fire, and had been wrought by the words that mouth had spoken.

All their lives, David and his men had seen life as a pointless struggle. Their task was kill or be killed. Everyone outside of their inner circle had deserved only hatred and fear.

He had seen otherwise in the eyes of the Son. Moreover, the eyes had also served as a mirror. Reflected back at him, he saw his own self. He saw how small, mean, selfish, arrogant and cruel he had been in the face of infinite good.

He felt in his bones that his life had ended. But what would follow? Was he, in fact, dead? Where was he?

He looked at his host. “Where…” he began, his voice still hoarse and raspy.

“You are in the monastery of St. Francis, near the ancient ruins of Koya,” the monk told him. “My name is Brother Antonio Rodriguez. I found you wandering at the foothills of the mountain.”

His brow furrowed. “Were you there? Did you see something?”

David could only nod slowly.

“I wondered. It is said one can have visions of God in the city. It is an old place, a sacred place. I myself have never had a vision, but I’ve heard of others.”

He glanced at David’s tattooed arm. “I know who you are. I know what you’ve done. But…how is it you are here, now?”

Slowly, with much prompting, and after taking more water, David related the story. Brother Antonio listened, and also summoned another monk to bring food. Then, he sat in silence, pondering David’s story while the outlaw ate a simple but refreshing meal of bread and beef.

“My friends and I, we never really believed in God,” David said at last, as he ate. “Darwin, in particular, denied it. But it’s true, isn’t it? All of it.”

“Yes,” Antonio nodded. “God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, made the world, and all in it. But man went his own way, and had looked in vain for fulfillment. He seeks it though pleasure, wealth, power, fame or honor. Solomon spoke of this searching in Ecclesiastes. So did Boethius. But all end in vain. Only through God, through repentance and reconciliation to him can one ever really be at peace.”

“Why is that?” David asked, feeling he was speaking with Darwin’s opposite. Really though, he didn’t mind.

Brother Antonio shrugged. “There must be no doubt where one’s loyalty is. Man actively rebelled, so man must actively, consciously, ask the Son to be their Savor and cover their sins. It can’t be done by just believing God exists or by trying to be good on one’s own.”

He regarded David thoughtfully. “Besides, even if one could earn one’s way into heaven, would that really

mean more people would go there? Some would say yes, but the problem is, what of those who are just a few deeds short? What of those who start late, but do truly start? No, there would still be those who were saved and those who weren't, with those not accusing God of being unfair. So God looks at the heart. The heart that actively goes to the Son."

"I want that," David heard himself saying. He paused, and nodded. "Yes. I'm tired. I want that."

"It sounds as if God was calling you through this experience. Yet…"

Brother Antonio paused. "You are still a criminal. What should I do?"

Before David could reply, another monk came in. "Brother, news from Ponil! Marshall Galligan found the

Sykes gang! He's heading for their place now. Soon, they'll be dead!"

XVII

Now the end of the gang happened as follows. Diamond, Shaman, Lucius and Esau all made their way back to the hideout. It was, as Darwin had told Galligan, an old abandoned fort in the crevasse of a canyon. Their loot was gathered in one room, while the ammunition was in another, and the living space still another.

Right now, Shaman was on the roof, looking for any signs of pursuit. The rest were gathered together, shaking, frightened, and uncertain. They all remembered what they saw, and the fear they had all felt. After that, they had fled, and couldn't remember exactly what had happened, only that they had made it back here. Of the loot they had supposedly taken from

the ruins, they could find no trace. If it had been real to begin with.

“What happened to David and Darwin?” Esau asked.

“I don’t know,” Lucius confessed. “I don’t know for certain what happened there. There’s something wrong. Some kind of witchcraft.”

“Witchcraft?” Esau echoed, swallowing hard.

“Well, what else could it be?” Lucius demanded. He gestured wildly towards the outside. “Heathens built that city. Who knows what the truth if it is? Now two of us are missing. Maybe more if we don’t do something.”

“Maybe they were just lost in the confusion,” Esau suggested hopefully.

“I’ll tell you what needs to get lost,” Lucius replied. “Us. We need to leave, get as far away from those ruins and that lion we keep seeing as we can.”

“Where?” Diamond asked.

“I don’t know. California, maybe. Or north. Anywhere but here.”

Shaman ran into the room. “I saw some dust clouds headed this way,” he said. “We’ve been found.”

Lucius swore. “Told you,” he said. “Witchcraft. We’ve been cursed! Now, we have to fight for our lives.”

“If that’s true, maybe we should just give up,” Esau said timidly. “If David’s dead, and…”

“Shut up, Brother,” Lucius interrupted. “I know you’re yellow, but don’t be this yellow, or I’ll put you down myself.”

“You shut up,” Esau said.

“What was that?” Lucius asked, cocking his head to the side. “You getting a spine now, of all times?”

“Shut up!” Esau yelled. “I’m sick of you talking to me like I’m some idiot! Let me tell you…”

Lucius punched him in the mouth. Esau lunged forward, but Diamond held him back.

“Shaman, load as much loot as you can,” Lucius ordered. “I’ll get this place ready for our guests.”

He and Esau glowered at each other. “As for you, I’ll let you live for Horseman’s sake. Shame you didn’t go missing instead of him. After this, you can do what you want, but until then, no one leaves without the others. Diamond, take him in back.”

Diamond, Esau and Shaman left, as Lucius walked with purposeful strides to their armory.

“What? How can you know that?” David asked, sitting up. Oddly, he felt more refreshed than he should’ve been after wandering the desert.

“Yes. And who are you, brother?” Antonio asked, frowning. “I don’t recognize you.”

“No time,” the younger monk replied. “If you want to help the survivor, you must go now.”

He turned, and abruptly left as quickly as he had come. David and Antonio heard three steps echo on the hard stone floor, and then silence. Antonio tried to follow, puzzled by the appearance of the monk. He knew everyone here well, and had never before laid eyes on the young man.

But when he had stepped into the hallway he looked both up and down, and saw that the man had vanished. The hallway, however, was too large and had too much of

an echo for anyone to sneak away without notice. Unless…

He looked at David once again. David was still trying to get up, staggering, but recovering with amazing speed. Antonio felt that there was more to this than an outlaw gang seeing its last days. He felt as if souls were at state. If so, then it was his duty as a man of God to help guide any souls he could home.

He went back into the room, and helped David to stand straight. “Are you able to ride?”

“I think so,” the outlaw replied. He looked at the monk questioningly. “Are you going to let me check it out?”

“Yes. I will get you a robe, and a horse. I will also come with you. Something strange transpires, but that much I know to do.”

Marshall Galligan approached the fort cautiously with his men. The day was clear and calm and he strained his ears to listen for any sound. But none came, and the men were uncertain.

Still, this felt right. While delirious, they believed Darwin to have unintentionally told them the truth. So Galligan split his men into two groups. One to remain on horseback, and the other to enter the fort.

His men obeyed, and half a dozen walked inside. They looked to the left, and to the right, but only saw dust and overturned furniture. Narrowing their eyes, and straining their ears, they kept moving through the compound.

Soon, they came to the back doorway, and saw four of the outlaws. One was mounting a horse, while the

other three were standing guard. Oddly enough one was carrying a small kerosene lamp.

“Stop!” the lead man yelled.

The outlaws turned, and the one with the lamp grinned wickedly before throwing the lamp down on the ground.

The men then noticed that there was a trail of kerosene leading back to the doorway. And there was also a lot of black dust that they had been crunching underfoot…

They screamed, and fired shots wildly. One hit the man on horseback, who fell. His horse ran away, littering the canyon with stolen loot as it fled. The other three ducked behind rocks while the burning kerosene connected with the gunpowder.

The back of the fort exploded, deafening the men in front, and causing many to be thrown from their horses. But Marshall Galligan and a few others managed to hold on, and rode around the now burning compound. He wasn't going to let them get away.

David and Antonio approached the canyon where the fort was hidden. To his dismay, he saw smoke rising out of where their hideout was. The faint sound of gunshots and shouting could also be heard echoing on the rock walls.

David swallowed. The unknown monk had been right. His friends were in trouble, probably getting killed.

He looked over at Antonio. He wished the monk had given him back his gun, but Antonio countered that while he felt they were being led here, he still didn't fully trust him.

“What now?” David asked.

Antonio’s eyes widened and he pointed at something away from them. “Look!”

David did, and felt yet another pang of dismay. There, at the entrance, the black mountain lion stalked. With silent, padded feet, the beast moved with past the main entrance to the canyon, opting instead for a smaller crevasse at the east. David knew from having lived in the area that the smaller path only went to a ravine lower than where the fort was.

Relieved when the lion disappeared into the rocks, David headed for the canyon opening. Then, something happened. A voice spoke to him.

“Follow the lion.”

“What?” David asked, turning to Antonio.

“I didn’t say that,” Antonio replied, looking around. “But I heard it too.”

“Follow the lion,” the voice repeated.

David had heard the voice before. It was that of the old man, the one who had led him to the ruins of Koya. The one revealed to be God himself.

But surely, the lion wasn’t another one of His forms. While the old man and the monk had inspired trust, the lion had inspired the exact opposite feelings. Feelings of fear, of dread. Of being stalked rather than being guided. He did not want to go down that crevasse.

Antonio, however, didn’t hesitate to obey. He turned his horse towards the small crack, and slowly squeezed his horse through. David’s knuckles whitened as he tightened the reins on his own horse. Then, reluctantly, he followed. Being a coward was worse than being dead.

Galligan and his men rode around to see the back of the fort littered with corpses, and spilled loot. The corpse of Shaman could be seen, and he knew another outlaw had been taken out. But that wasn't enough. He wanted them all gone. He wanted Ponil back at peace.

A shot rang out from overhead, and to the right. One of his men fell off his horse, and the others whirled around. The canyon wall to the right was littered with rocks, and he saw that three of the outlaws had made it to a high point in front of a ravine.

"Hey marshal!" one of them, Lucius, called out. He grinned, and his eyes sparkled at the sight of the blaze he had started.

“Your men had just one second to scream before their flesh melted, and their blood boiled, and their insides charred!”

With a cackle, he and the other two opened fire. Marshall Galligan snarled, and whipped out his own pistol. His men followed suit, and they shot back.

Another of his men fell, while the outlaw named Diamond also crumpled. The marshal took careful aim, and shot Lucius in between the eyes.

The sadistic look changed into one of shock, and he toppled backwards. He then grabbed at Esau, and locked his fingers around an arm, pulling them both into the ravine. The men heard a sickening crunch as the bodies hit the ground.

They stopped firing, and Galligan blinked. It was over. They had won. He and his posse shouted in

triumph, and began to begin picking up stolen valuables to return to their owners. Galligan would be hailed as a hero.

Then, the unexpected sound of a mountain lion could be heard through the canyon.

Antonio and David squeezed their way through until they finally reached a place where it opened up enough to allow plenty of movement. Of the lion, they saw no immediate sign, but what they did see caused David to cry out, and jump off his horse.

There was his brother, lying flat on his back. He had fallen down here, and had slammed down violently enough to crush his bones. Lying in a pool of his own blood, he wouldn’t last long, but amazingly, still breathed.

“Esau!” David shouted, running to his brother’s side. Antonio followed, pulling out a crucifix, and muttering quick prayers.

“David?” Esau rasped weakly. His neck was broken, so he could no longer turn his head. David knelt over him, and gently put his hands on either side of his face.

Tears streamed down the faces of both brothers. “I’m sorry, Esau,” David said. “I’m sorry we made you come to this place. I’m sorry we made you join our crimes. I’m sorry for everything!”

“David…Lucius…”

Esau moved his eyes to the side. David followed his gaze, and saw the lion in the shadows. A skull and hand were all that remained of another man.

The lion growled low in its throat, and began stalking towards them. He shook his head and rubbed tears out of his eyes. It couldn't end now, not like this.

He felt something pushed into his hand, and opened his eyes. Antonio stood by him, and had given him his crucifix.

"Face him, David," the monk said.

"How?"

"Faith. Always faith."

David held up the crucifix. The lion's eyes seemed to narrow, but it kept walking closer.

"I know what you are now," David said. "You've been stalking us for a long time. You've gotten some of us too. Lucius."

The beast licked its lips and bared its teeth.

“But not me. Not Esau. Go away and never come back.”

The lion growled, and slowed down. Its whiskers twitched, and it pawed the ground.

“I turn to Him. And away from you.”

The lion roared, but David held his ground.

“In God’s name. Leave!”

It roared once more. Then, with a look of hatred, it turned and ran out of the crevasse. David never saw the black lion again.

He sighed heavily, and turned back to Esau. Fresh tears wet the dying man’s eyes, but they were no longer ones of pain or despair. They were those of peace. And relief.

“Thank…you…for saving me…” he rasped. His eyes were growing dimmer. David knelt down and, still holding the crucifix, grasped his brother’s hand with his own free one.

“I…believe….Jesus…”

Esau’s eyes closed, and he breathed his last. A lump welled up in David’s throat, and he wept for his brother. His family, his friends, and even his enemies, were gone now. He was left alone in this rocky tomb.

No, not alone. The monk was still with him. And the one who had first brought him to the ruins of Koya was here too. He had helped David banish the lion. He had saved his brother’s soul. Now, he wanted to save David’s soul as well.

Antonio, after a few minutes, gently pulled David to his feet. “Come. It is over. Come back to the monastery with me. Learn to serve God.”

David, dazed, stood and returned the crucifix to its owner. “Yes. Show me.”

XVIII

“All of this, you believe was so that Esau and I would come to God?”

David and Antonio had been riding back to the monastery. For several hours, there had been relative silence, followed by periods of mourning. Antonio had submitted that God had been seeking them through the mystical experience at the ruins.

“Yes. God seeks all who will come, through any way that they will come,” Antonio replied. “But they must come through Jesus, through faith, not works.”

The ruins could be seen on the horizon now, standing watch over the land since either of them had been born. And would continue to do so long after they would die.

“What of those who never hear?” David asked. “Like the ones who built the ruins?”

“I don’t know. But we trust that somehow, some way, they too will have the chance to accept the Savior,” Antonio said. “We must trust that a just and merciful God will indeed do that which is just and merciful.”

They turned and headed to the waiting monastery entrance.

“At any rate, once more, we are saved through faith not works. If those who never heard could be saved through works and not faith, it would imply that not

speaking of Jesus was better. And how can ignorance ever be better than knowledge?”

David considered that. As they passed the gate, he nodded.

“Give me that knowledge,” he said.

Epilogue: Transfigured

It was almost nightfall by the time Father Vincent rode into the small, dusty town of Ponil, New Mexico. He had travelled here all the way from New York City by train, and had to borrow a horse to journey from the nearest train station to here. The year was 1925, and back east, he had already seen the automobile begin to take over the roads. But here, in this place, remarkable only for the small Franciscan monastery on the hill, things went on much the same way they had when the west was still wild.

The young priest dismounted by a nearby tavern, secured his horse, and went inside. A beautiful Hispanic woman with long black hair stood behind the counter. She smiled as he walked up to the empty bar.

“Good evening, Father,” she said. “Something for you?”

“Yes. I’ll have your house special, and a bottle of beer,” he said, sitting down.

The woman turned and called out the open back door in Spanish. A man emerged with food cooked from a chuck wagon. Father Vincent began to eat, and found himself rather enjoying his meal.

“Have you business at the monastery, Father?” his hostess asked, bring him his beer.

He nodded once. “I was summoned here from my home diocese by someone named Brother Diego. Would you know him, by chance?”

“Only through reputation, Father. The monks keep largely to themselves. He is said to be a man of great piety and humility, worthy indeed of Saint Francis.”

Father Vincent grunted, and took a sip of his beer. He really didn't know why he had been sent here. Until a few days ago, he didn't even know Ponil existed.

The Archbishop had called him into his office one day, and shown him Brother Diego's letter. With a baffled expression on his face, he asked if Vincent knew anyone out west. Vincent hadn't' New York had always been his home, and since being ordained, he usually worked as a scholar and writer for the Archbishop.

The letter had stated that Brother Diego was dying, and would soon need the last rites. However, he wished to make his final confession with someone from outside his monastery, stating that his story was one he wished to share with the world. The Archbishop and Vincent decided that he would go, for despite the unusual circumstances, they both felt very strongly that he should go.

Finishing his meal, he paid, thanked his hostess, and went back outside. He reached the monastery in a few minutes, and was led to a stable by the doorman. When they entered the monastery proper, Father Vincent was greeted only b silence. His guide conducted him down the narrow, torch lit corridors until they reached a cell at the very end of the hall.

“Come in, Father Vincent, come in,” an old man’s voice called from within. “I have been waiting for you.”

Vincent started at the sound of his own name. the guide opened the door for him, but didn’t follow as the priest went in. on the bed lay a very old man with the air of anticipation. The only other objects were a chair, nightstand, and lamp that cast strange shadows on his aged face.

“I trust your journey went well?” Brother Diego asked, waving to the chair.

“Yes, Brother,” Vincent answered, sitting down. He studied the old man’s face carefully, trying to get some recognition out of it. “Have we ever met, Brother? You’ll forgive me if we have, but I don’t recall you.”

“No, we have not,” Diego confirmed.

“Then how did you know me?”

“I didn’t. I had a dream in which I was told to summon you. Our Lord, you see, tells me things from time to time in this manner.”

Vincent’s eyebrows rose with wonder and curiosity. He had never met one who had experienced the miraculous before. Indeed, in these cynical times, even most Christians seemed disinclined to believe such things still happened. Vincent, however, didn’t fancy that human beings knew everything about the universe.

Briefly, he wondered if brother Diego would be canonized one day after his death.

“You have been granted this gift before, then?” he asked.

“Only a few times since my conversion several decades ago,” the monk replied. “I wish to tell you of it. It is my testimony and my confession combined. You will take it back to your Archbishop, so that they may draw whatever lessons from it that they will. I suppose the greatest thing one can learn from me is that no human being is beyond Our Lord’s power to save, if he will but submit. Saint Paul is a prime example. Saint Augustine is another. I have spent many delightful hours learning of them and reading their writings.

Vincent nodded as Brother Diego sat in his bed. “Please begin, Brother.”

Diego sat upright in his bed. “The name of Brother Diego is, of course, unknown to all outside this small village. But once, I was known as David Sykes.”

“Sykes?” Vincent echoed, felling the mystery of the man become still greater. For that name had joined those of Jesse James and the Clanton gang in notoriety. “He was the robber who terrorized the Cimarron. But he disappeared suddenly, forty years ago. His gang was rounded up at the same time. As I recall, they seemed to have lost their nerve, spouting off wild tales of spirits and witchcraft.”

Brother Diego smiled sadly, and shook his head. “It was not anything like that. A shame, that my old partners were able to see it any other way.”

He paused, and Father Vincent waited for the older man to collect himself, and tell his tale.

“As I said, I was born David Sykes. I spent my childhood on a small farm in Mississippi. My mother died when I was young, and my father was a hard, cruel man who used to beat me.

“In my youth, the Civil War erupted, and I took advantage of the chaos by running away from home. I enlisted in the Confederate army, and developed a taste for killing. There is something perverse, yet exhilarating, in having the power of life in death over others that way. God forgive me.”

He shuddered before continuing. “The war was lost, and I found myself despised by Union victors and the abolitionists, who considered me a great sinner. How little they knew the grievous nature of my sin. For I hated not black men, but all men.”

“The Lord is gracious and merciful,” Father Vincent quoted. “Pray, go on.”

“I made my way out west, and tried my hand at ranching. When I failed, I joined with a few old comrades, and took to robbing we were quite successful at it for years. I would rob stagecoaches and foolish travelers by day and spend my nights drowning in wine and women.

“Of course, there was the occasional deputy who would try to rein me in. I remember one who entered a saloon where I was drinking one day. He demanded I face him outside. I could see him through the mirror behind the bar, so without turning around, I shot him by using his reflection to aim. I pointed my gun over my shoulder, and ended his life. Things went more smoothly for me after that.

“But one day, I met an entirely different sort of man. My friends and I walked into one of our favorite saloons, and at our usual table, an old man sat. he looked like a

shabby mountain man, with homespun clothes and long hair and beard. Yet he had the brightest eyes I had ever seen.

"One of my men demanded that he move or else he'd get hurt. But he only smiled and said we were the types who would hurt him even if he did everything we asked. He said we would do so to prove who had the power. Then he asked if we were trying to prove it to others or ourselves.

"We were getting angry by now at his words, strange as they were. But then, he offered to buy us a drink, and pulled several gold nuggets out of his pockets. That intrigued me enough that I sat down with him, my men following suit. He didn't tell us his name, but did say that he could use our help. He said he'd found a treasure in gold in the mountains, but was too old and weak to mine it himself. He proposed to hire us and in

return, we could share equally in the treasure. The nuggets provided all the proof we needed for his story.

“We travelled out of town for three days and nights through the mountains and forests. During that time, we noticed tow odd things. First of all, our provisions didn’t decrease no matter how much we ate. The other thing was that our guide didn’t eat at all, yet never lost any of his stamina.

“By the end of the third day, we reached a mountain with stone huts carved in the rock. Other dwellings were carved in a terrace above us, and were once connected via ladders. I learned later that I had been taken to a village of the Anasazi, that race of cliff dwelling people who vanished centuries ago.

“Our guide led us into one of the huts where he made us look around. There was no treasure at all. We asked the meaning of it. He said these vanished people

were now facing judgment, both for good and ill. Then, he said that we now faced judgment as well.

“Suddenly, his entire form began to glow with a brilliant white light. His eyes turned into coals of fire, and noise, like the sound of stars, filled our heads. My men screamed in terror and fled, leaving me alone with our guide, but I was frozen on the spot. His eyes of fire kept me still.

“I don’t remember all that I saw in those eyes. I believe human minds aren’t large enough to hold but so much. I saw all of time and space in those eyes. I saw that I was in the presence of God Himself. He had brought me there, in those circumstances, because only an extreme experience could pierce my hardened heart.

“I came to the next morning, alone. But I knew I couldn’t go back to my old life. So I wandered until I

found this monastery. Here, I have lived since, in peace and repentance.”

He paused again, and seemed to grow weaker. Father Vincent could see that his time was near. He reflected on the extraordinary story. Somehow, he could feel the truth of it, and didn’t doubt the great lengths that had been taken to turn this once wretched man.

He spent the next two days at the monastery, talking with Brother Diego and committing his story to writing. The last night, he held the monk’s hand as he administered the last rites to him. Then he died peacefully. Father Vincent was left alone, while somewhere above him, a man found his God.